





THE CONFESSIONS OF A
CURRENCY GIRL

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THE CONFESSIONS OF A CURRENCY GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

I AM not aware that I ever had any of that unnatural precocity which is supposed to distinguish the clever child, but I believe I must have been a very small thing indeed when my mind took its first impressions of this terrestrial sphere. What my age was at that particular time I have never been able to ascertain, though I have a most vivid recollection of my father's grand, sad face, seared with pain, as it were, and bronzed by the fierceness of the sun; of my mother, with her gentle ways and winning smiles; and of Will, dear old

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Will, with his sturdy boyish figure, his fearless blue eyes, and his thick golden curls. And then came Harold, poor little Harold. He was younger than I, and was our pet, our baby. How proud we all were of him. What a grand head we thought he had ; and when we saw him take to books as naturally as other children do to toys and sweetstuffs, we all prophesied for him a great future. Then came that dreadful accident to his spine, and we knew that he was crippled for life. Poor Harold ! We watched his beautiful face grow thinner, paler, and, oh, so spiritual-looking, so dreamy, so utterly unlike anything of the earth, that often I was afraid to look into his great eyes ; and I have seen mother sit with him in her lap staring at him in a blank, wondering sort of way, till, overcome by her emotions, she would clasp him suddenly to her breast and sob convulsively.

But they were peaceful, blessed times, and though I had no knowledge of father's

yearly income, I knew that we never had any debts we could not meet, that the larder was always full, and that the clothes we wore were of the finest. Indeed, I was always under the impression that we were very rich, for, with the exception of Mr. Langton—the wealthy squatter from whom we rented our land—there was no one in the neighbourhood who had a better house or finer horses than ours. Father, being a thrifty man, and proud of his wife and family, had saved and schemed to better our condition, and I have often heard him declare that he would let them see if there was anything in the country too good for his children. I didn't think there was, myself—I didn't see how there could be—but I not infrequently wondered who the mysterious “they” were, why he was so fond of repeating the expression, and why he always looked so combative when he said it. Usually his nature was as placid as mother's, and if not quite so sweet—which no man's could be—it was

more intense, and this became doubly impressive from the very repression of the stronger spirit. He would fondle us by the hour, and in the winter nights, when the wind howled fiercely without and the rain fell, turning each little creek into a raging torrent, we would draw our chairs round the big wood fire, father in one corner, mother in the other, and he would read to us stories of heroic deeds, of great fights by sea and land, or the biographies of those great Englishmen who have immortalized their country; or, to please Harold, who usually nestled at his mother's feet, staring with his big eyes into the leaping, crackling fire, he would read or narrate wonderful legends of good and evil spirits, giants and dwarfs, dragons, and all the catalogue of horrors which, strangely enough, are served up to appease the intellectual cravings of the infant. And Harold loved these weird, grotesque stories, and the stronger and more improbable they were, the more interested and enthusiastic grew he over

them. And father, with one of his rare, sweet smiles, would pat the lad on the head and call him a strange boy, and at regular intervals would send off to Melbourne for books of poetry and fairy lore, till Harold had quite a little library of such treasures, which he guarded with jealous pertinacity.

It is the pride of intellect that all shall honour it. No matter how the cynic may sneer, the vulgar laugh in his vacant way, nature forces them, inwardly at least, to confess its power. I think this reverence for what we call the brain is, like our religion, born in us. We cannot cast it aside even if we would. A man may not be religious—nay, he may even be deemed irreligious—and yet he will have no one tamper with his faith, nor would he change it for worlds—that is, if he possess any of that doggedness which sets the world spinning. Strange thing, is it not? For, after all, is our religion born in us? It seems so, since man has evolved it from chaos. Or is this brain-

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worship born in us also ? Or what is born in us, except sin ?

Nevertheless, this homage to intellect is, in its way, as true as most things ; and whether it be real or affected—for what is not tinged with insincerity ?—it is a fact of which every ordinary observer must be well aware. I know we were all proud enough at the thought of Harold possessing more than the average share of brain-power, and when, in his eighth year, he penned a short fairy tale, which bore a striking resemblance to certain portions of Jack the Giant-Killer, we thought that greatness had at last dawned upon the family, and regarded Harold as a being to be cherished and pampered. What possibilities were not centred in that pale-faced lad ? Who could say what thoughts were simmering in that little head ? In this is the glory, almost the terror, of children. The imagination fails to picture what they may not be, and the fond parent, left to her own imaginings, sees a star brighter than

any other in the firmament. I know my mother worshipped her youngest born ; perhaps because she was so proud of his intelligence, perhaps—and this I think more likely—because he was so dreadfully afflicted. And then, he was never happy unless he could touch her hand, her dress, or at least look upon her ; while Will and I, both being strong and therefore independent, grew more in touch, in sympathy with each other. We rode our ponies to school together, and many a helter-skelter over the dusty roads or across the long dry plains have he and I enjoyed ; and he, who was venturesome even for a boy, put me up to many a trick of horsemanship, and, instilling me with much of his own recklessness, taught me to despise creeks and fences and boulders, till he used to say there was no better or pluckier rider in the district than I. But that was Will's modesty, for he sat his own pony like an ideal horseman, and knew not the meaning of the word fear. And what a boy he was !

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Straight and strong as a mountain pine,
with eyes as blue as the heavens on a still,
hot day, and hair as yellow and curly as
a cluster of honeysuckle ; the flush of
healthy youth on his cheek, and strength
and freedom in every movement. Poor
old Will ! They were happy days, were
they not ? The air was nectar to us then,
and in the very thought of life there was
so much joy that we had no time to think
of the morrow or the morrow's clouds.
And yet they were so dark when they
came, and so charged with woe for us.

If there was one thing that kept us
free from trouble so long it was, perhaps,
the strange, almost lonesome, life we led
at Granite Creek—for such was the name
of the watercourse which ran through
our land. We rarely had any visitors,
and more rarely still went anywhere.
Once father took us all to Melbourne for
a month, and I shall never forget how
delighted I was with the marvels of the
great city, but when we returned the old
lonely life commenced again, never so

lonely as now. Oh, to live for ever in the whirl of a great city, amid its roar and bustle, thought I, and for a full month I chafed foolishly at the dulness of Eden. But, after all, there is life, blood, movement in a city. The men in it are the men who move the levers which set the world buzzing. You are one of the mighty ; and I often wished that fate had formed me of the other sex, so that I too might go among men and place my hand upon the lever of the world, and set all things in motion. Dreams, of course ; but what would the world be without its dreams ?

In saying that we never went anywhere, or that we never had any visitors, I meant that we did not engage in social duties to the extent which might reasonably have been expected of us, owing principally, so I thought, to mother's want of energy and father's rooted dislike to society of any kind. He worked hard all day, and so that he could have his family about him when the night drew

in, he cared for nothing else. This was a source of considerable surprise to me, for whenever anyone did come to our home-stead father was always so courteous, so extremely affable, that one could scarcely help thinking that in the society of strangers he found his keenest pleasure. There were, however, two or three people with whom our family was on excellent footing, chief among them being the Wallaces of Wallan, and the rich squatter, Mr. Langton, who had known father in England ; indeed, they had both been at Cambridge University together.

But of the two the Wallaces were the dearer friends, for there was not that difference in our purses which we had to confront when in Mr. Langton's presence ; besides, mother and Mrs. Wallace had been schoolgirls together, and when mother left England to join father, her friend accompanied her, for she too had set her heart on a man who had quitted the Old Country to seek his fortune.

Brave men ; how I envy them ! They are the true knights-adventurers of these later days, and though they swing the axe and the pick instead of riding about in tenfold steel and rescuing timid maidens, they are none the less heroes, heroes to the core. No wonder the new countries thrive when the energy of the old pours into them.

Our friendship with the Wallaces dates back to my earliest recollection, and I know I used to think Mr. Wallace a very great person, and one possessed of unlimited power, especially after I had seen him at a great auction sale disposing of countless head of cattle in the most unconcerned and indifferent manner imaginable—for he was auctioneer, civil engineer, architect, estate agent, and goodness only knows what not. He had been everything in his day, father used to say, and had tramped the colony from end to end ; had fought in the stockade at Ballarat, and had been mainly instrumental in effecting the capture of more

than one notorious bushranger. But as trooper or digger, swagman or gentleman, he was always the same kindhearted, genial man ; a trifle pompous, perhaps, a little rough on the surface, and liable, at times, to make use of blunt language—language, too, which might easily disconcert you were it not for the eternal twinkle in his clear eyes. Of a different pattern, but equally as genial and full of warm affection, was his good wife. She and mother, as I have said, had been schoolgirls together, and the devotion of those two old friends would have convinced the most cynical that there is yet unswerving love and loyalty in the human heart. It seemed as though they had formed themselves on each other's virtues, and had striven all the days of their life to live up to their lofty ideal. That they failed in their endeavours I cannot even now believe, knowing how weak flesh is.

The Wallace family consisted of two children, Arthur and Ella, the boy being

some two years older than Will, the girl a few months older than I. But in spite of the disparity of our ages—and children are great sticklers in this respect—we were fast friends from the early days of our infancy. Indeed, I had no other girl friend, and if I was not staying with Ella, Ella was staying with me. Then there was Arthur, too, of whom they always teased me—a great, shy, overgrown boy who used to look exceedingly embarrassed whenever I spoke to him, and who would blush and tremble like a baby at any little attention I might be considerate enough to pay him. Yet he was a handsome lad ; that is, I think he must have been, for he had a pair of great, brown earnest eyes — almost as earnest as Harold's—and a dark, clear-cut face like those which I have so often seen since in pictures of young Italians. But I never thought much of poor Arthur's looks then, for those were the days of the ephemeral mind for which there is no morrow.

CHAPTER II.

AND now the first cloud was rapidly beginning to darken the horizon of our lives, and a gloomy cloud it was, through which our sun sought in vain to shine. I have, as I have said, noted that father never went anywhere, and that mother, with the exception of her friendship with Mrs. Wallace, lived her life shut up within herself ; and I have likewise wondered why they should live so strangely when both were gentlefolks, well to do, and therefore most desirable acquaintances, especially in such a limited social circle as that of Wallan and its neighbourhood. But I was soon to learn the cause of this self-inflicted solitude, and then I ceased to wonder at it. A breath will wound the sensitive spirit, and they were both sensitive and vulnerable.

Though the many would have received them with open arms, neither father nor mother would lay themselves open to the shafts of the brutal.

I was ten years old when I was first made aware of my heritage, though for a long time previously I had become conscious that wherever I went I was the object of considerable attention. Even the girls at school took to looking at me in a quizzing sort of way, whispering, and then leaving off their whispers as I approached ; and upon several occasions I had seen old ladies put up their glasses, look me over curiously as though I were some strange animal, and then mutter, " Dear me," " What a pity," " And so pretty, poor thing," and then turn away with a shake of their heads. I could never understand those curious glances, those ominous head-shakes, and used to think that there was something supremely grotesque in their exhibitions of pity ; for I was young and strong, and not un-handsome either ; at least, my modesty has

every reason to believe that I was not, and moreover, I had known no care—except one slight attack of measles—since the day I had first entered on this sublunary scene. There was plenty of that to come, unfortunately, but as yet my path had been a sunny one, and I gave no thought to the winter which was surely creeping onward.

The full significance of it all befell me one day in school. We were hard at our geography, and when the question time came round it so happened that I was asked what Botany Bay was famous for, and upon my immediately answering “Convicts,” all the girls about me gave such unmistakable signs of tittering that the teacher’s face flushed hotly, and I saw her regard me with a look of the most intense pity. Not understanding why she should thus honour me, though guessing intuitively that there was something wrong, I returned her look with one of wonder, and, maybe, one of appealing also, for she came over to me

and said, "Never mind them, Florence dear. They are only ignorant country children. Pay no heed to them." But when I told mother that night, she took me in her arms, sobbed over me, and called me her "poor unfortunate child;" and when father came in she told him, and I saw his face grow black as a thunder-cloud.

"They shall go near that school no more," he said, addressing mother. "I will not have my children insulted."

And I saw mother look up at him, oh, such a pitiful look, and his own hot eyes grew suddenly dim. He turned his face away and walked to the other end of the room.

"It is we who are to blame," she said.
"God forgive us."

"Perhaps!" he exclaimed angrily.
"But why should blame attach itself to these innocent children?"

Mother, instead of replying, for father was then in one of his combative moods, turned and caressed me more tenderly,

while Harold, his big eyes full of wonder, put his arms round our necks, pressed his beautiful face in between our faces, and mingled his tears with ours. That night remains in my memory as one of the saddest I ever knew, and yet one of the sweetest too, for all the loving tenderness which we had hitherto experienced from our parents was eclipsed by their love of that night, and I well recollect that when I went to bed I wept myself, joyfully wept myself, to sleep.

But we went to that school no more, and father engaged a governess for us, who used to come over from Wallan three times a week; though, if the truth were told, most of our education was undertaken and completed by mother, who had once been a creditable scholar, and who remembered sufficient to take me through the world, though we intended that Will, and Harold too, if he were strong enough, should go off to Melbourne to finish his education.

And so the weeks sped by, and though

I had not forgotten the cause of our leaving the school, and mother's subsequent tears and father's anger, I was yet too young to puzzle over what I could not possibly comprehend, and had it not been for the occasional glimpses of my old school-fellows, it is more than probable I should have forgotten it altogether. One day, however, the mystery was made clear once for all, and, young as I was, I knew that a shame had fallen on us from which we should not escape this side of the grave.

Will and I were returning one day from Wallan, where we had been to order in the week's stores, both mounted on our ponies, and as full of life as two young people of ten and twelve can be. I know I was thinking how splendid it was to have a pony of one's own, and to be able to scamper along the roads or across the paddocks without the slightest exertion—to oneself—when we came to the slip-rails which led into one of Mr. Langton's large paddocks, which in its turn led, by

a grassy road over which Will and I had had many a furious race, to our own home. Through this paddock we invariably went while going to or returning from Wallan, and through it we now proposed going. On reaching the rails, however, we were surprised, and not agreeably so, to see three of the town boys seated on the topmost rail eating sour apples.

“Hullo!” cried Will, imperceptibly drawing rein; “there’s that Patsy Dillon and his friends. They’ve been stealing our fruit again. I told Smith to keep his eyes skinned, but I don’t believe he’d take the trouble to chase anybody if he saw them.”

“But this is that awful Dillon boy,” I ventured.

“Of course it is,” was the reply. “But what of that?”

I thought a lot of it, for this Patsy Dillon, a lad of about fourteen, was a terrible young scapegrace, whose reputation for impudence and wickedness was

unequalled in the township. He was the acknowledged bully of the place, the terror of all respectable children, and the admiration of all the worthless members of that mixed community, who applauded each evil effort, and prophesied that he would prove to be one of the grandest bushrangers the country had ever turned out. And it must be confessed that Patsy strove hard to live up to the exalted opinion his friends held of him, and never by any chance did he miss an opportunity of doing wrong, or of injuring or insulting all who came within his category of "stuck-up."

That we were classed among the stuck-up—that is, the respectable—we knew well, and Will and he had on more than one occasion bandied some words of an uncomplimentary nature; but Will, like the rest of the younger boys, had a sneaking respect for Patsy, fostered, no doubt, by fear, for Master Dillon was deemed a boy of uncommon pugilistic prowess.

As soon as I saw this ill-dressed, ferocious young monster perched perkily on the rail, eating our apples, too, with an attendant monster on each side of him, my heart failed me, and, pulling in my pony, I whispered to Will that it would be better for us to turn back into the main road and abandon our thought of a grassy gallop.

Will shook his head. "They've seen us, Flos. If we were to turn back now, they'd know I was afraid of them."

"But aren't you, Will?"

"No, I'm not," says he defiantly, but all the same the poor old fellow looked very serious as he rode up to the rails.

There sat the three boys grinning like so many monkeys, but not one of them offered to move.

"Hullo, Hastings!" cried that dreadful Dillon boy, his horrid mouth full of our fruit, "'ave a apple?"

"No, thank you," says Will, as dignified as a young lord, or, as I take it, a

lord ought to be. "I should be very much obliged to you, though, if you wouldn't mind getting down while we pass through." And springing from his pony he handed me the reins.

"Git down," echoed Patsy, with an impudent grin. "Well, I'm blowed!" The proposal almost took Master Dillon's breath away.

"If you wouldn't mind," said Will.

"But I do mind," said Patsy, with an evil look. "You just git up, young feller, and take yourself orf."

"Very well," replied Will, who entertained no thought of making the young scamp descend from his perch. "I shall not forget to let Mr. Mackenzie (Mr. Langton's manager) know about this. He's had his eye on you for a long time, Patsy Dillon."

Patsy uttered some rude remark, but Will turned to remount his pony without replying.

"Bah!" cried the young ragamuffin, seeing Will was not inclined to quarrel,

“ who’d take any notice of what you say,
you convict ! ”

Convict! I looked at Will in wonder, my astonishment growing as I saw the blood rush furiously to his face. Then it passed away as suddenly as it came, leaving him as white as death.

“ Convict,” repeated the Irish boy, with an evil leer. “ You’re a nice one to give yourself airs, ain’t you? If my parents is poor,” continued the young monster, mockingly, “ they’re honest, and that’s more than you can say, you *lag!* ”

Will clutched his bridle nervously, so nervously that the bit jingled loudly. A dreadful look came into his face, a look that I never wish to see in a young boy’s face again. One moment he seemed to hesitate, then swinging suddenly round walked back to where the three boys sat. Looking up at his tormentor, who with his mouth full of fruit sat grinning as usual, though rather nervously now, he said savagely, “ You’re a liar ! ” and seizing

Master Dillon by the ankle, brought him ignominiously to earth.

In a moment there was a dreadful clatter and confusion. Master Dillon, bounding to his feet, cursing more horribly than a bullock-driver—trying, like all his class, to terrorize by the violence of his words—rushed at Will, and in a moment they were pounding away at each other like two young demons. I screamed loudly, and Will, thinking, as he said after, that something was the matter, left his adversary and rushed over to me. This move inspired the Irish boy with renewed courage, and he began to taunt and threaten us to such an alarming extent that I, growing extremely terrified, started to cry. I begged Will to come away, but he was as obstinate as an unbroken colt.

“There, there, don’t be frightened,” he said, trying to pacify me—dear old Will! “He called me a convict, Flos. He’s a liar, and I’ll make him eat his lies.”

“Come on, then,” said Patsy, throwing off his coat and turning up his dreadful shirt-sleeves, “and let’s see what sort of stuff you’re made of. Come and tell me how you was lagged.”

“Don’t, don’t, Will!” I cried, for I knew of the evil reputation of that horrible little monster, and I fully expected to see him pulverize poor Will. But Will, once his blood was up, was his father in miniature, and as such was not very easily daunted.

“Look here,” he said, his face quite hard and old-looking, “I’ll fight him if he kills me.” And with that he pulled off his coat, handed it to me with an excited sort of smile, and deliberately rolled his sleeves above his elbows.

As long as I live I shall never forget that fight. Even now my blood warms at the recollection of it. I live my young days over again ; I see that evil little monster, Dillon, and Will, face to face ; their hands fly like lightning through the air ; they roll from side to side and come

with a crash to the earth ; again they uprise and once more fall foul of each other ; and all the while my heart is beating as though it would burst, the blood rushes so tumultuously through my brain that I almost fall from the saddle, and the tears which rush to my eyes dim my vision. But at last I hear the sound of a dreadful blow, and the next moment Master Dillon is wriggling on the grass with Will standing over him with clenched hands : and he makes the young vagabond eat his words as he said he would.

Dear, brave old Will ! How my heart went out to him as he stepped up to me, a smile on his poor bruised face. I did not ask him if he were hurt ; I knew that his wounds were honourable. I could only say, "Oh, Will, Will !" and cry again for joy.

To slip on his coat and mount his pony, which I had been holding, was the work of a moment ; then turning to Dillon, who presented a deplorable front, and his two companions, who did not yet seem to fully comprehend the downfall of their hero,

he commanded them to let down the rails, an order which they reluctantly obeyed, and into the paddock we passed.

We rode on for some time in silence, I glancing alternately at Will and he looking nervously about him as though he were ashamed to meet my eyes. Poor boy, as though the shame were his. Rather was he a hero of whom I was decidedly proud. He would be a man some day, and stand up for me always, fearing nothing, afraid of nobody, secure in the knowledge of his own strength. Oh, what a grand thing it must be to be a strong man !

And as I thought of all these things, and wondered and admired his prowess the more I thought, I was at a loss to understand why he, who was usually so amiable and easy-going, should have flared up so excitedly and fought so desperately over a word.

“ What did it mean, Will ? ” I asked.

He turned to me, a strange look in his flushed eyes.

"Mean?" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Why did he call you a convict?"

I saw his hot face turn very pale, but he answered with a palpable effort of indifference, "He wanted to insult me, I suppose."

"He won't do it again, Will?" I said with a laugh.

"Not to my face anyway." And digging his heels into his pony, away he darted, I following hard in his tracks.

As we approached our house—a roomy one-storied building of alternate brick and granite, with a large verandah in the front of it over which was twined creepers and roses and grape-vines—we beheld father and mother sitting in the verandah, and before Will could stop me I had galloped towards them, flung myself from the saddle, and rushed up the steps crying out that Will had just beaten Patsy Dillon in a fight. Poor mother rose from her chair with a look of intense alarm on her face, and when Will, all bruised and

dirty and stained with blood, approached in a shame-faced way with his head hung down, she sprang towards him and embracing him passionately began to sob. And then poor old Will sobbed too, and Harold, his big eyes starting out of his head, limped up on his crutches, and learning the cause of the tears, began to whimper in unison. As for myself, I could have cried till further orders.

At last father spoke.

“So you have been fighting Patsy Dillon,” he said, “and your sister tells me you have beaten him?”

Will muttered something about it not being his fault, but that father’s statement was substantially correct. I thought that for a moment father’s eyes glistened with pride, though I believe I also doubted if that look betokened a softer feeling. I understand it better now.

“Have you forgotten,” went on father rather sternly, “that I have more than once warned you to avoid such boys as Patsy Dillon?”

"No, sir," said Will, looking up through his tears, and a fine, honest, manly boy he looked as he spoke, "but he insulted me, and—and, I had an old debt to settle with him, and I settled it."

"And him too," I said, laughing and crying at the same time.

Mother pressed him fondly to her, and turning to father, said, "Surely, Frank, you are not angry with the boy?"

"Not yet," said father with a strange smile, "for though I do not approve of his fighting every ragamuffin in the town, I would not have him forget to always stand up for his rights like a man. Hard knocks he'll get in plenty, and I should like my son to be able to give as well as take. But I must know more of this insult of which he speaks. What was it?"

A painful flush passed over Will's bruised face, and he held his head down without speaking; but I answered quickly enough, "He called Will a convict."

In a moment father's whole demeanour

underwent a curious change ; his eyes blazed ominously, and he looked from one to the other with a look of terror and fury, like an entrapped lion might. Then he turned suddenly away and strode to the far end of the verandah. Poor mother pressed the warrior closer to her, though her excited eyes were riveted on her husband.

But presently father returned to us, and though he again had command of himself, his face was still changed and very terrible. Haggard, almost ghastly, he was, and his eyes shone with so much rage and pain, that I had only courage enough to take a momentary glance at them.

“ Is this,” he said, and I could not help noticing how his voice quivered—“ is this the first time you have been called that name ? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ You have never mentioned it to me.”

“ No, sir, because I knew it was all lies.”

I saw mother and father exchange a deep look, the meaning of which I could not then fathom.

“Of course, of course,” he answered hurriedly. “For the future you must keep to yourself, and have nothing to do with these people. Such persons, evil themselves, are always trying to drag someone down to their own level. Now run away and tidy yourself. Children,” turning to Harold and me, “you will find the tea already laid within.”

But as I went into mother’s room—the windows of which opened on to the verandah—to lay aside my hat, I heard her and father, who were still outside, speaking in a low, earnest voice. What they said I could not quite catch, and I did not dare stay and listen; but as I was leaving the room I heard him say, “And for this, dear, we have brought those poor children into the world.”

“God’s will be done,” she answered in a choking voice.

I took a hasty glance through the

window, impelled to this action by something greater than curiosity. Mother's face was hidden on father's breast, and her body was shaking with sobs. His arms were about her, and he was kissing her hair.

What could it mean ?

CHAPTER III.

AND now I think I may as well abandon even the pretence of mystery which may have shrouded these opening pages, for ours is, or hopes to be, a plain-sailing narrative ; our aim the relation of simple facts in proper sequence.

The covert sneers which we had borne so long in ignorance, the pitying looks, the whispered conversations broken off as we approached, the thousand and one slights which I see so plainly now, though happily ignorant of them then, were not without their cause, or bred of spite alone, for we were currency people—convicts ! Or, at least, when I say we were convicts, I mean that father had been transported to New South Wales, and that as the just laws of heaven and earth

declare that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, we were of the race of Ishmael. For a long time I did not quite know what it meant, and it was not till I was fifteen or sixteen that I thoroughly understood my position. Not conscious of being inferior to those about me, I could not understand the difference between the convict and the free. Try as I might, I could not see where my inferiority lay ; nor was I the less surely convinced that there was no boy in the district the equal of Will. And if father was sent to New South Wales he was a gentleman with it all, and any man might have done as he did. Not that he was without blame, but it seems hard that he should have paid so dearly for a moment of justifiable passion, been branded with the indelible brand, stained he and his from generation unto generation.

It all came out one day. I was then in my sixteenth year, and Will, who was nearly three years older, was then a great big fellow, promising exceptional develop-

ment in the next few years. There had been a row that morning out in the sheds between him and one of our men, over some young cattle which the latter was branding. I don't know exactly how it came about, but Will said the fellow was unnecessarily brutal to the poor beasts, and when he remonstrated with him the man threw down the brand, made use of some very violent language, and told him to do it himself. Now Will was never one to be trifled with. Though even-tempered enough if you did not purposely cross him, he had yet all father's fierceness of disposition with little of his restraint; beside which, he was a very powerful young fellow, as healthy and hard as a gum-tree; one who would as soon fight as not, and who would put up his hands quicker than he would take them down. He therefore ordered the man to pick up the branding-iron and go on with his work.

"I'll see you d——d first," said the man.

Will took a step nearer him, an angry light in his eye.

"Do what you're told," he said.

"Not for you," snarled the man, "nor no other d——d convict."

Will's fist shot out and the man went over with a crash. Then followed a bit of rough and tumble; but the man was no match for Will, who soon gave him all he wanted and then drove him from the yard, threatening him with a like chastisement if he ever showed his face there again.

This was the story Will told as we all sat at tea that evening. Father paled visibly at the mention of that dreadful word "convict," and I saw mother put out her hand and draw Harold a wee bit closer to her.

"And now," said old Will at the conclusion of his narrative, his eyes fixed on father's face, his own face very troubled and serious, "I want to know what it means, dad. I may not be a man in years, but I am both big enough

and old enough to understand things now."

"Well?" said father, though just a little nervously I thought.

"I want to know," continued Will, "if there is any truth in this convict business, because if there isn't, I'll break the neck of the next man who taunts me with it. You don't know what I've put up with, dad, in one way and another. As a boy I have often been ashamed to hold my head up; as a young man I have suffered more deeply still. Not that they say anything outright—they know better than that—" he added grimly, "but people can look what they think as well as speak it."

"They think," echoed father hotly. "Why, boy, they are not fit to wipe your boots."

"Perhaps not," answered his son queerly, "but that is not what I want to know."

Here mother interposed with some remark about keeping oneself to oneself,

to which father did not reply, but rising from his chair began to pace rapidly up and down the room, every now and again stopping and staring out through the window. At last he stood stock still and faced us, and we all drew our breath hard, knowing that something unusual was coming.

"It is time you knew, Will," he said, looking desperately serious even for him, "and I think, dear," he added, turning to mother, "that the other children are old enough too."

Mother shook her head with a frightened look and tried to speak, but the effort only ended in a low sob. Harold crept over to her and hid his face in her breast, and I felt as though I should like to do the same, but the spell being on me I could not then have moved for the world. Will dropped the pear he was peeling and looked up into his father's face in his own resolute way.

"You are good children all," father began, "and as such are worthy of the

highest honour. Think, then, how it must pain me to be able only to dower you with a heritage of shame."

"Then it is true?" gasped Will incredulously. "You are a ——." He stopped, flushed, and then held down his head.

"A convict?" asked father, with a queer smile. "Yes. But listen to me, Will, and you, too, children, and remember what I say, for this subject must never be broached again. Perhaps I ought not to broach it now, but I think I owe it to you, children, and, moreover, I wish only to justify myself to you."

After speaking thus, he strode nervously up and down the room for a minute or two, then coming back to his chair, and seating himself deliberately in it, he unfolded, with a few swift touches, the secret pages of his past.

"It is neither my wish nor intention to dwell on what I was, for the remembrance of what I was and what I ought to be would but intensify my wretched-

ness. Yet you must know this, children, for it may give you some small comfort when the clods with whom you are surrounded affect to despise you, that your grandfather was the twelfth baronet of our house, and that in your veins flows blood as good—if we may reckon its goodness by antiquity—as any in England. This seems a vain and pitiful boast now, but I have not forgotten that I was proud of it once, nor do I pretend to forget that it will add to your prestige in the eyes of the world."

" You never mentioned this before," said Will.

" No, because—because when my disgrace came on me I bore another name, and as in my trouble my family forsook me, I took a solemn oath that no word of them or theirs should ever pass my lips ; and only now, when I see that by speaking I may lighten your load a little, do I venture to break it."

Will bowed his head without speaking, while father, after passing his handker-

chief several times across his forehead, continued,—

“ Being the third and youngest son of a not over-wealthy father, at no time might my prospects have been considered too encouraging, but I must confess with shame that I was the principal instrument to my own destruction. One folly led to another, follies whose recapitulation would prove of little profit, till at last, driven desperate by my own straitened circumstances, and the relentless enmity of my people, I took the Queen’s shilling, not as Francis Lawrence Hastings, but simply as Frank Lawrence. You see, I had pride enough to shield them even when my heart was hot with anger.

“ Well, things went on smoothly enough, if one may call the life of a private soldier smooth, till a certain Captain Hawkes, a gentleman whom I had known in other days, joined our regiment.” Here I saw mother hide her quivering lips in Harold’s hair. “ This man,” con-

tinued father, “a pompous upstart, had been an unsuccessful suitor for the affections of your mother, and, rightly or wrongly, he deemed me the cause of his failure. For a long time, however, I escaped recognition by him, but at last the time did come—though, for his own ends, he never acknowledged the recognition—and then my martyrdom began.

“I will not weary you, or anger myself, by recounting the numerous insults to which I was subjected by that man, the countless petty indignities which were thrust upon me, and all, too, with his tongue in his cheek, as it were, for never once did he admit to having pierced my identity. But at last the climax came. One day on parade he called me that which no man of spirit could bear unmoved, because it is an insult to his mother’s memory. My blood, never too well under control, boiled up and I answered him back. White with anger he rode up to me, and, before I had any suspicion of his intention, cut me across

the face with his whip. In a moment I was a raging madman. The memory of all the wrongs I had suffered at this man's hand inspired me with frenzy. I stepped out from the line, and, swinging my rifle, brought it across his head and knocked him senseless from the saddle.

"For a long time he hovered between life and death, but he did not die, and so I escaped the death penalty. As Frank Lawrence—for until I was convicted did he guard my secret—I was tried for attempted murder, found guilty, and sentenced to ten years' transportation. Of my life here I need not speak. You know all that is necessary to know. In the due course of time she who had been faithful to me through all my follies and my bitter banishment came out to join me. Your mother, children, was that woman, the sweetest, noblest creature that God ever gave to man." And speaking thus, he arose, and went over to her, and put his arms about her neck and kissed her; and she, poor soul, began to sob loudly,

and Harold and I joined in, and I am not certain that father's eyes were not likewise running over with tears, only my own were so dim that I could not see clearly.

Will had abandoned his pear, the poor boy's heart being too full of grief to eat, and after a great struggle to keep down the emotion which was bubbling to his lips, he said, "I am glad you have told me, father. I only wish I had known before. I was afraid you had done something wrong."

"Wrong!" echoed father with a curious laugh. "They don't usually give a man ten years for doing something good. But I understand you, Will. I was never a rogue."

"Thank God," said his son, and rising left the room.

So this was the secret of father's life. This accounted for the innumerable strange, sometimes pitying, looks which greeted me on every hand, the whispered broken sentences which so often reached my ears—"currency people," "sent out,

you know," "what a pity," etc. So I was really a convict's daughter ; I possessed the overwhelming convict taint. Henceforth I was to be the scorn of all the more favoured mortals ; no matter what I might be, or what I might do, that one word "convict" would overshadow all ; for to us Australians—I was going to say *free* Australians—there is no taint so terrible as that of transportation, no crime so black as that of belonging to that unhappy class, and though things are changing a bit now, the old prejudices die hard. They tell me that the racial hatred in the United States of America borders on the intense. It must be something like our terror and hatred of the convict. Father a convict ! It seemed impossible. He, with his gentle ways, his noble face, his ever kindly eyes. He, a convict—one of those creatures whom I, and most like me, had always regarded as a set of monsters little inferior in iniquity to the denizens of the pit. Yet from his own lips had come the

words : there was no gainsaying them. We, like the Jew of old, were cursed, and would wander on and on seeking peace and never finding it.

That evening as Will and I were seated in the old summer-house at the bottom of the garden, talking over the new terror which had fallen upon us, we heard the click, click of Harold's crutches coming down the path, and, lest he should discover our weakness, I hurriedly dried my eyes, while old Will stood up to pluck a rose, whistling dolefully as he did so. In a moment the boy had hobbled to the entrance where he stood looking at us, a strange light beaming in his big eyes. Then he came into the house and sat himself beside me.

"Sis," he said tenderly, laying his hand on mine, "you are crying?"

"What nonsense!" I answered, trying to look indignant, though my spirit sank and my eyes grew dimmer as I watched him.

"Of course it is," he said with a

strange laugh, “ask old Will there, who looks as bad as you.”

“Well,” said Will, owning up like the man that he was, “I confess that it has knocked me a bit silly, old boy. I couldn’t, couldn’t think that father had ever done anything wrong.”

“Wrong!” echoed Harold excitedly, his pale face flushing hotly, “do you call it wrong to do as father did? I don’t, then. If I had been in his place I would have killed that dog of an officer.” And he brought his crutch down upon the floor with a tremendous bang.

“Well, you can’t say the old man never tried his best,” said Will with a grim smile. “Not that I blame him—don’t think that. I’d have done the same in his case—perhaps more—but it won’t make any difference to us, will it?”

“But why should it make any difference to us?” asked Harold.

“Ah!” said Will with a sigh, “you have not gone about as I have; you don’t know what they think of convicts.”

"But I have read enough of them," was the reply, "and very foolish characters they seemed; as absurdly ferocious as the wicked giant in a fairy tale. Why, I have laughed over them by the hour. Surely no one in his senses would believe in such a class?"

"If they do not," answered Will, "they will pretend they do, if only to annoy the likes of us."

Harold began to look serious.

"Do you really think," he asked, "that they will look down on us because father defended himself like a man?"

"They won't stay to think of that. We are currency people, Harry. They'll never get beyond that, my boy."

"But we need not necessarily be bad on that account."

"You do not understand this generous, Christian world," said old Will, and I never recollect his voice sounding more bitter. "It is not content with the torturing of the parent. Its Bible teaches it that the sins of the fathers shall be

visited upon the children, and it takes good care not to forget the teaching."

"But we have done nothing wrong," said Harold. "It is not fair that we should suffer."

"Fair!" echoed Will, with a growl of disgust. "You don't want much, do you?"

"Only justice, Will."

"Then you may get it in the next world, Harry, old boy, but never in this. A queer go, isn't it? What do you think of it?"

"I hardly know," replied Harold in a low voice, "but I think you must be mistaken, Will, because such selfishness and injustice cannot be universal."

"Oh, isn't it, though?" was the dogged reply.

"I would rather believe not," said the boy, "indeed I would. How can they think ill of us when we have done nothing to merit their censure? To me it seems like going against reason."

"And is," says Will, "and against

justice too ; but it goes on all the same.”

“ I can even understand them looking askance at father,” continued the boy, as if oblivious of Will’s remark, “ because, rightly or wrongly, he has been criminally punished by the laws of his country, but what have we done that we too should be looked upon as outcasts ? ”

“ We are his children, Harry, and a bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit.”

“ But is he a bad tree, Will ? ”

“ According to law.”

“ But not to knowledge or reason. And is his fruit bad ? I think not. You are a good fellow, Will ; who can deny that ? —and I am sure there is not a better girl in the colony than Flos. As for me,” he added, in a choking voice, “ surely no one could be envious of me ? God has punished me enough already.”

“ Too much, poor little Harry. Never mind, old fellow,” continued Will, putting one arm lovingly round the boy’s neck, “ you’ll have a glorious revenge yet.

Wait, wait till the world is echoing your name, and greeting you as the first great Australian poet."

"I'm afraid it is only a dream, Will," said the poor boy, who for a moment had flushed at his brother's words. "How can a wretched little cripple, a currency boy to boot, ever hope to make a great and honourable name?"

"Why not, if he has the brain?"

"Ah!" sighed Harold, "if he has the brain."

"Which you have, dear," I said. "Remember, you are only a boy yet. You cannot do great things till you are a man."

"Then I shall never do them," he said. There was something so profoundly touching in his voice that I felt my heart rise almost to bursting. I had to turn aside to let the tears fall unobserved.

"What are you crying for?" he asked, slipping his thin white hand into mine. "I don't mean that I shan't live, Sis, though I sometimes think that it would

be better for me if I were to die. It would be kinder, anyway, for I don't think that I shall ever be proud again."

"Nonsense," said Will roughly, though he too held his face away, and stood looking out across the rapidly darkening plains, "why shouldn't you? Haven't you got brains, and isn't that the grandest thing a man can possibly have? None of your common cleverness either, but the real thing, Harry. Why, in a few years all Australia will be singing your praises. Who will care a rap then whether you are a currency boy or a prince's son? Work, hope, and never let yourself be daunted. It is a fight between you and the world. If you won't give way, it will."

"But you are very strong," said Harold.
"What am I?"

"If it were a mere matter of physical strength," said Will, "I should have my doubts, but happily it is not. Once get the ear of the public, and though you were a chimney sweep they would applaud you. The few will always decry—for

nothing enrages the unsuccessful like the success of others—but the many will uphold ; that is how men have lived down the opposition of powerful cliques. Go on, Harold, think and work ; write and write again, and if you win, your prize will be the greatest earth can give.”

Dear old Will ! I never thought he had it in him, but he had read a good deal, and I shrewdly suspect that he had listened well to father and Mr. Langton, who talked very deeply at times. Anyway, he soothed poor Harold’s sorrows and filled him again with hope, and when we all three returned to the house, some half-hour later, we seemed to have already left half our trouble behind.

CHAPTER IV.

THE next day Arthur and Ella Wallace rode over from Wallan, and though the society of my only friend should have proved most agreeable to me at that period, I was yet conscious of a certain restraint in her presence, which did not escape her prying eyes. She would insist upon my being ill, and as I had to prove to her that I was not, I recollect assuming an unusual gaiety and expressing a more than usual affection. The fact is, I was really nervous before her, for whenever she looked at me with those earnest eyes of hers, she seemed to read my heart, and that, in its present state, was precisely what I shrank from opening. Yet how I longed to do so, and would have done had not fear held me back,

though I could not doubt the genuineness of her affection. We had grown up as sisters, having no other sister. If I was not staying at Wallan she was with us at Granite Creek, and we used to say that, like our mothers, we would be friends through life, and through death too, if such a thing were possible. She was a girl of my own age ; we had similar likes and dislikes. I knew that she was devotedly attached to me, and I shrewdly suspected that she was not an indifferent admirer of Will. Whatever there was in the past I felt sure she would ignore, doubting not that she would still cling to me, though in my veins ran the criminal blood of all the world. A fig for your fairweather friend, say I ! Give me the one who will stand by you in your darkest days, when evil tongues whisper, and eyes are upturned in righteous horror ; who, knowing your virtues (for had you none he would never have loved you), tries to understand your vices ; who puts himself in your place and strives to think what

he would do under like conditions. This is the man you will never lose, if you have any good in you ; for when he thinks, he sees and understands. Only the worst of it is so few people can think, or will take the trouble to learn.

Before the Wallaces left that afternoon Will approached me looking rather serious.

"I've been thinking it out, Flos," he said, "and I have come to the conclusion that it is better to get it over."

"Get it over," I repeated, simulating ignorance of his meaning ; "get what over?"

"You know well enough," he replied almost fiercely ; "this convict business. I've been skulking about the whole blessed day like a real criminal. I don't know what Arthur 'll think of me, poor old chap. He's a good, simple fellow, Flos. I hope you'll make it up one day."

"Don't talk nonsense, Will."

"Nonsense," he echoed ; "where is the nonsense?"

"I do not want to marry. I shall never marry."

He laughed. "So all young girls say, but, you know, they have been known to change their minds."

"I shall not change mine. Even if I had the wish, who is there that would marry me?"

"You!" he exclaimed, in a tone of astonishment. "Why, thousands, to be sure, and only glad of the chance."

"A currency girl?" I added bitterly.

"The sweetest girl in the country," he said tenderly, his defiant eyes growing wonderfully soft as he looked into my face. And then he put his arm about me and kissed me, and told me that he was only afraid there was no one in the country half good enough for me.

Dear old Will! I know it was your true love that proved my angel in the days that were to come.

"I am sure Arthur knows there is something up," he went on, after he had finished singing my praises, "and I think,

dear, that we had better make a clean breast of it—tell them all there is to be told. If Arthur is what I take him to be he will respect and like us all the better for our confidence. If it's the other way about, well, let him go. It will be another illusion shattered, that's all, and we shall not miss much in losing him."

"I am sure you wrong him, Will. It would make no difference to him, nor Ella either, whatever we might be, or whatever father had done."

"I am one with you there," he replied, "but we shall see."

Later on Will and I walked part of the way back with the Wallaces, he leading Ella's horse and Arthur his own. We walked on very solemnly for a long time, till Arthur suddenly burst out laughing.

"Well, I'm hanged if we're not as solemn as a funeral," cried he. "What's up with you, Will, old man?"

Will, being thus bluntly appealed to,

looked at him earnestly, and then at Ella. and me. I nodded encouragingly.

“Look here, old chap,” he said, and I thought his voice sounded very strange, “something is up. You’d look serious, too, if you were in my shoes. Not that I wish you were, Arthur—God forbid!”

“You have had a hard knock, old man?” said Arthur in a low voice.

“Yes,” said Will, “a clean knock-down, old fellow; but not, I hope, a knock-out.”

Then he told our secret exactly as father had told it to us.

“So you see,” he added, “we are convicts—yes, convicts—why should I shirk the word? I won’t pretend to say that I’m not glad father was no criminal, neither shall I attempt to justify his actions. I only know that I would have done the same. So much for the man. As for this thing, this brand which Flos and Harold and I shall bear to our graves —this convict mark upon our foreheads—

I tell you candidly, Arthur, I'm afraid of it. What matters it to the world that my father is incapable of crime, is he not, in its view, a criminal of the most atrocious nature—a denizen of Botany Bay? Why Botany Bay should be worse than Pentridge, or any other prison, I leave the wise ones to expound. To me there is no difference. But perhaps I own a bias. I know that it is so, however, and that I shall carry about with me a secret which will make my life one long torment. I shall shudder at the name of convict, and turn white at the sound of Botany Bay. I know that henceforth I shall be an outcast, and a coward on that account."

"Never a coward, Will," said Arthur, taking his hand, "and never an outcast either while I and mine have a roof above us."

Poor old Will shook his friend's hand without speaking. Then he said in a quivering voice, "That's good of you, Arthur. I thought—forgive me, won't

you—that you too might turn on us when you knew what we were."

"Could you think so badly of us?" said Ella, who had not spoken before.

"No," said Will, "I could not, in my heart of hearts. I tried to be hard, that was all; to prepare myself for anything. It has been a great effort to tell you both, but now I'm glad you know."

"My dear old Will," cried Arthur, "we have known all about it this many a day. Long before you did, it seems. But there, there, it makes no difference to us. Let us hear no more of it. It is not an agreeable subject, so why shouldn't we drop it, now and for ever? Any fellow who thinks the less of you for it is a cur and beneath your notice. Of one thing you may be sure—no one shall twice speak ill of you in my presence."

"Thank you," said Will, once more shaking his friend's hand. "You are the same good fellow I always believed you to be. You give a chap new hope."

"And you?" cried Arthur, looking hard at me.

"Oh, I shall exist at Granite Creek," I answered. "Ella and I have made up our minds to live and die in single-blessedness."

"Heaven forbid!" said he. "You would never be so selfish?"

"I can't answer for Ella, of course. She may be weak enough to succumb to the attractions of some male charmer, but I, never."

"I hope you will let me come and see you sometimes?"

"Well, if you pass your examinations successfully," said I, alluding to his study of medicine—for it was intended that he should become a disciple of Æsculapius—"I'll send over for you occasionally to come and doctor our sick cats—for of course we shall have lots of cats, like true old maids."

"I shall feel honoured," he replied gravely.

Why," said I, "you have the pro-

fessional tone already," and I somewhat flippantly imitated him.

"I am practising," he replied without a smile.

"Though not yet in practice?"

"Precisely."

That was the worst of Arthur; he was always so grave, so very much in earnest. If he looked at you, there was a seriousness in his looks which, at times, was absolutely unpleasant. You could not be frivolous with such a man. Everything he said he meant, and being utterly devoid of commonplace tittle-tattle, he was oftener silent than otherwise. Now this may be an excellent trait in a man—for is it not Solomon himself who tells us that silence is golden?—especially in the company of men, whom we will suppose have a smattering of knowledge. But it is absolutely necessary, for his own advancement in our good opinion, that a young man of these days should be able to play the fool occasionally—no very great effort being required in most cases. Girls, as a

rule, do not like a serious man, although they think they do. I half suspect they imagine him to be continually searching their inmost heart and analyzing their every motive. What a monster, to be sure ! Conceive a man prying in behind this barrier of bone which shields that mystic matter which we call our brain, reading our every thought, and comprehending our unuttered desires ! Or conceive him gloating like a demon over our captured heart as it writhes beneath his microscope, telling of the stains and waves of blood which go to make up the sum and passion of our life ! Who is to be safe with men like this let loose ? We know well that we are all better than our neighbours, and yet even we have some things by us which we would not care to show.

Woman, to whom custom has refused to grant that freedom of discourse so arbitrarily claimed by man, has consequently many more secrets to guard : she is, in fact, a storehouse of secrets, a

cushion pricked all over with invisible pin points of hopes, and fears, and desires. Therefore, how necessary is it to preserve the outward gloss ! But should you chance to tear aside that satin binding which looks so fair, you will see the centre, or heart, transfixated with innumerable impressions bubbling blood of many colours. Not all black, thank heaven, but just enough to make us wish to keep the cover on. Now, as we detest the microscope, so do we the prying eyes of the inquisitive. Humanity is an easier book to read than dullards imagine, but it is a perverse book and resents the magnifying glass personally, though it always makes use of it to look at a brother or sister. The worldling will let a woman think he believes her to be all that she pretends ; he is wise. She too, is not without her cunning, and fools him to the top of his bent—a task of infantine ease. But what she cannot tolerate is your superior sort of person who looks at her with steady, earnest eyes, eyes which seem to look

through hers and penetrate the secret chambers of her brain. There is something offensive in this person. He will not take her at her own valuation.

Not that poor old Arthur was such a dreadful creature as this. It is true he was always very earnest, and, for a young man, singularly reticent, but more open, honest eyes, I do not think I ever saw. The only fault about them was their almost inhuman steadiness, a fault, I grant you, which some people of our acquaintance would give much to own. In short, he was not fool enough ever to be popular. He would have been irresistible to ladies over thirty. Such a man was first cousin to the Sphinx. Your purse, honour, life itself would have been safe in his keeping. But to girls who are "green in judgment" such men are extremely trying. I liked Arthur well enough, I always thoroughly believed in him; to me he seemed quite different from the generality of boys, but at the same time there is no denying that I did

think him just a little *slow*. Was he not also as ignorant of the world as I, and could I possibly look up to anyone whose knowledge was no greater than my own? Then again, though always respectful, and, when I come to think over it, even courteous at times, the poor fellow was sadly lacking in the glorious attribute of *style*. This is an essential for woman-worship, and I'm afraid our embryo doctor was at a sad disadvantage in consequence. Will called it "side," but I knew better. Moreover, a vain girl cannot be expected to recognize her hero in one whom she heard described as the "clumsiest owl in Wallan." It rather takes the pride out of her, even though she has only a sneaking regard for the said owl.

We walked with Arthur and Ella a good mile from the homestead, repeating over and over again solemn vows of eternal friendship. For good or ill we swore allegiance; let what might ensue, nothing should ever come between us.

"There," said Will, as the Wallaces mounted their horses and cantered off along the dusty road, "there go two of the best people in the world."

"Yes," I said, "two of the best people in the world." He looked at me quickly, but seeing I was serious marched on in silence.

"What do you think of her?" he asked, when we had traversed some hundred yards or so.

"What have I always thought of her?"

"Of course," he answered with an awkward laugh. "I should have asked you what you thought of *him*."

"And I should have replied what business that is of yours."

"Hoity-toity," says he, "how we flare out, just as if there was something in it."

Though I could see he only wanted to tease me, I yet grew mightily indignant, for there was more truth in his insinuations than I liked to own. Yet what brother ever cared for his sister's indig-

nation? Indeed, he does not seem to think that sisters have a right to grow indignant. It is a thing beyond him; equally as much so as the fact that his sister is like other women, no better, no worse. This seems a preposterous idea, and takes him a long while to grasp—if he ever does. I am not certain that there isn't a shade of sacrilege in the thought. Will says there is, but then he was very fond of me, and in his fondness forgot my human frailties. It is a beautiful thing though, this reverence of the sister. Think of it, ye girls who have disagreeable brothers. How do you know but that in their heart of hearts they may think the best of men unworthy of you? And how do ye try to live up to their standard, O my sisters? When the temptation comes, do ye ever stay to consider that ye may cast an everlasting slur on one who loves like unto God Himself?

As we continued our journey through the paddock, the one before the rails of which Will had annihilated the power of

that little monster, Patsy Dillon, we were overtaken by Mr. Langton, who, as was his wont, pulled up his horse and gave us the time of the day.

"Homeward bound, children?" he asked, after the usual salutations had passed.

"Yes, sir," said Will, touching his hat, for everybody was extremely civil to Mr. Langton, not so much, I think, on account of his wealth, which was reputed boundless, as of himself; for he was a genuine man, a gentleman to his finger-tips, as father used to say, though those tips might have broadened a little through hard work. For he had done his share of toil like the rest of us, and by his own skill and industry had built up Langton Station, one of the finest estates in that part of the country. It was of him father rented the five hundred odd acres known as Granite Creek, for he and dad had been schoolfellows, companions, in the Old Country, and he was not one to kick a man who was down.

" You did wrong, from a practical, sensible point of view," said he, when father had finished his story, " but you did what nine out of every ten *men* would have done. I haven't forgotten old times, Hastings, so you must throw in your lot with me." And so father, who had some practical knowledge of farming, took up his selection on Granite Creek; and there he built our house, and round it planted the roses and the grape vines, and the beautiful English trees with their dense foliage, through which even the fiercest sun failed to pierce. In three years he transformed the sterile track through which the little creek ran into a miniature Eden, and then, having some money by him, he sent to England for mother, who had corresponded with him all the time.

" First and foremost," wrote he, " I must let you know what you have to expect should you determine to join me. I am a convict, never forget that. The crime I committed is one for which I do

not grieve, but it has brought a punishment you can little imagine. I will not say that I am altogether an outcast, but even here, in this free country, where so many of my class are at large, the antipathy against us is so overwhelming that I and mine must ever be subjected to unceasing humiliation. On the other hand, dear," and here mother has often told me the paper was so blotted with tears that she could scarcely decipher the writing, "if you are brave enough to risk all this, if you think that you can find contentment with me, and happiness in seeing me happy, come, and if a life's devotion can recompense you——"

Well, well, it's a sad romance, isn't it? Who would think that that grave-eyed man who bends unceasingly at his toil from morning to night, content to see his wife and children about him, repining not for the lost days, wishing no other life, had suffered so much, so much? Or who would imagine that that tender, grey-haired woman, with her pale, sweet

face, had ever possessed sufficient courage to face the dreadful, shameful life in the new land? Ah, me, the days of martyrs and heroes are not yet passed.

Quiet, and yet so courageous; going about with her sweet sad smile and her soft words—what a woman was here! I know she keenly felt her position, and I understand now why she preferred the peace and solitude of her own home to the rush of the outside world. But her face was sad, oh, so dreadfully sad, and when she smiled she was saddest of all. Yet there was with all her quiet dignity a force of character which told of a courage equal to her love. That might, perhaps, be taken for granted, considering all that she had done. Yet I remember one dark winter's night when she proved herself possessed of the courage of a hero as well as the devotion of a saint. Father was away from home that week with some cattle which he had taken to the Boorta Show, and about twelve o'clock one night we were all

awakened by the violent barking of the dogs. I remember how we all rushed to mother's room, Harold and I clinging to her, Will standing by her side with a half-defiant, half-frightened look on his little pale face. We could distinctly hear the tramp of the robbers on the verandah. Now they were trying the door, now the windows ; but they were evidently novices at the business, for they did not succeed in effecting an entrance. And all the while we clung to mother, moaning piteously, while she alternately took us in her arms or patted our heads, telling us in a low trembling voice not to be afraid, for that God was watching, and He would protect us.

At last the men began to knock at the door, and still we stirred not. Meanwhile the barking of the dogs grew louder and angrier. We heard one of the men utter a furious exclamation. Then a shot followed and poor old Ponto went off howling.

This seemed to waken mother from the

lethargy into which she had fallen. We were in an isolated position—a mile at least from any other house. On ourselves must depend our salvation. Mother, kissing us, whispered us to remain quiet, and then silently quitted the room, followed by Will. The half minute of their absence seemed like an eternity, but when they returned I saw that she had been to the kitchen, for she now held father's gun in her hand, a weapon which had always hung above the kitchen mantelpiece. Poor little Will was by her side, the kitchen poker grasped firmly in his little hand. The lion's cub, you see, had something of the lion's spirit.

By this time the knocking on the door grew louder, and mother, fearing they would ultimately break it in, called out, “Who's there?”

“A friend,” was the reply.

“No friend would call as you have at such an hour as this,” answered mother.

“Friend or not, old woman,” said the voice, “you'd better open the door pretty

quick, or I'll break it in." And as if to give us a foretaste of his intentions, the owner of the voice delivered sundry heavy kicks on the panels which made them creak.

"Frank," cried mother, pretending father was in, "you are wanted outside."

At this the two men laughed loudly.

"Very good, missis," cried the voice derisively, "but we happen to know that the old bird's at Boorta. So open the door and have done with this nonsense. It'll be the worse for you if you don't."

"I will not open the door," answered mother, and her voice had grown so hard that I scarcely recognized it; "and what's more, I am armed, and I'll shoot the first man who enters the house."

Well, they didn't attempt to enter. They growled and threatened much, and swore more, and when they were leaving fired several bullets through our windows; but beyond that they did no harm, and after waiting for quite half an hour to make sure that they were gone, we all

knelt by mother's bed and mingled our sobs with her prayers. I shall never forget that night. The brave, sweet woman, the sturdy little son; the wild night without, and the wilder men. She who would not, under ordinary circumstances, have raised her hand against the meanest of God's creatures, would have fought that night, ay, and killed too, ere harm should befall her little ones. And Will, with the kitchen poker in his poor little hands—a very David, forsooth, an infant Titan! Whenever I think of that night I always murmur Campbell's beautiful thought,—

“A noble mother must have bred
So brave a son.”

CHAPTER V.

MEANWHILE Mr. Langton, whom I have most shamefully neglected all this time, walked on beside us, chatting in his genial, cheery way—he being very fond of us children—till we approached our house and he beheld father's form in the distance. Then, shaking his horse up a bit, he trotted on ahead, and we watched him ride up to father, dismount, make his horse fast to a rail, and then go up on the verandah.

“Come over for a yarn,” said Will. “Strange that he should take the trouble to ride over for the express purpose of talking with the old man.” Will sometimes used this rather vulgar appellation in speaking of father; but as I knew he

meant nothing disrespectful by such familiarity, I cannot say I ever resented it.

"Not so strange either," I replied, "since they suit each other and have tastes in common."

"A currency man, you know," suggested he.

"But a gentleman, too, Will, and therefore the equal of Mr. Langton, and the superior of nine-tenths of the people hereabouts." I am afraid the modesty of this speech is not too apparent, but when your case is not a particularly good one, a little braggadocio may be permissible.

"Yes," said Will, not wishing, as I could see, to dispute the point.

And yet a child may surely be excused for extracting every ounce of consolation from the prestige of its parent? And father was a man who must have commanded respect even under the most disadvantageous of circumstances. I have often heard Mr. Langton declare

that he was the only man in the district to whom it was a pleasure to speak, and that it was a lucky day for him when Hastings came to Granite Creek. And how they did talk, to be sure, upon every known subject it seemed to me, bandying the names of the great classic writers with a freedom which showed considerable familiarity with those worthies. Science, poetry, philosophy—there was no subject upon which they did not linger and upon which they did not disagree. This, of course, proved the very fuel of their argumentative fire, and if at times they piled on a little too much of it and the flames spouted up rather ominously, they always burnt low again with inconceivable rapidity. Both men had excellent tempers well under control, and understood that argument was applied to argument, not man to man. This is a thing over which many people blunder. They identify themselves with their argument, and in consequence look upon the destruction of one as the annihilation

of the other. Such people live a life of tumult and die despised.

To Harold these conversations were school, college and university all in one. A training so unique no small boy ever had. For hours he would sit, curled up in his low chair, his eyes fixed intently upon the face of the speakers, his ears taking in every word. And Mr. Langton grew to like and admire the boy, and often, in the middle of his hottest arguments, he would turn from father to the attentive lad appealingly, "Now what is your opinion, Harold?" At which poor Harold, overwhelmed with confusion, would blush most painfully and confess his ignorance with a stammering tongue. But Mr. Langton was wont to declare that there was much more in the boy than the superficial glance took in. He knew of Harold's hopes and ambitions, and did all within his power to foster his love of study. Books on every conceivable topic he sent over for the delectation of the rising

poet, though volumes of verse, travel and biography were the boy's especial delight.

"We shall make a poet of you, Harold, never fear," the squatter one day said, after having duly perused one of the poor boy's effusions. "I won't say these verses are perfect. Candidly, my lad, they are not; your poet does not grow like a gooseberry. But you have form and style, and you are imitating good models. By-and-by you will not imitate at all; then you will be a real poet."

"But is it not impossible not to imitate somebody," asked the boy, "when the writing of poetry is confined to certain rules?"

"Only in the form of the verse," was the reply, "though Whitman, the American poet, has even despised that. Thought and expression you may cultivate. Rhyme only is really arbitrary, but it, being mechanical, is easily conquered. Why, you don't want even an ear for it. As

for imitation," he went on, "I should let that concern me little, for I hold that every man is original; that no two men write alike, that, moreover, to do so is an utter impossibility. So-and-so has a few pronounced characteristics which he employs, well knowing their value. They are mere pyrotechnic displays of intellect shot out to enthrall the shallow; flash squibs of thought which startle you for the moment. They are but another form of Vanity, as the Preacher would say. You will find the wisdom they illumine as old as Solomon—a wise man notwithstanding certain erratic actions. He discovered, even in his day, that 'the thing which has been it is that which shall be, and there is no new thing under the sun.' So don't trouble your head about so-called originality, Harold. Write as nature dictates, and when you have learnt to separate the wheat from the chaff, learned, in fact, to know what others have written and thus avoid it, you will find the wings of your innate originality quite strong

enough to bear you through the clouds of ephemeral criticism."

All of which Harold took to heart, that is, as much of it as he could understand, and went about his verse-making with new inspiration. Already he could see the golden dawn descending. Like the shower which enwrapt the wondering Danae fell the sweet hopes about his heart, and he would come to me and put his arms about my neck and tell me the thousand and one secrets which filled his breast. And I used to listen to his verses and duly praise them, and not untruthfully either, for they were good verses, giving promise of future excellence.

"How do they sound?" he would whisper, his face aglow, his great eyes burning into mine; "do they sound like poetry?" And I would answer, "Beautiful"—I believe I would have said the same had they been the vilest doggrel ever written. "You will be the first great Australian poet, never fear. Every man in Australia will be proud of you.

Perhaps, in time, the English will recognize you too, though I am afraid that much an Australian would appreciate would be meaningless to them. Still, Harold, if you can conquer England, you have the world at your feet. What do you think of that, my brother?"

"I cannot think of it," he would answer excitedly, "I dare not. But it would be wonderful, wouldn't it, Sis?"

Poor Harold! Wonderful indeed!

As Will and I approached the verandah, the conversation, whatever it had been, ceased, and Mr. Langton turned and surveyed us with a look of genuine admiration.

"And I'll wager they don't think any the worse of you for it," I heard him say as we mounted the steps. "Ah," he continued as we advanced towards them, "a bonnie pair, Hastings, a bonnie pair. You ought to be a proud and happy man."

"And am I not?" asked father with a smile.

" Of course you are ; how could you be otherwise ? I would I were half as fortunate."

" You ! " exclaimed father amusedly. " What have I in comparison with you ? If I am occasionally happy, you ought to be in a perpetual state of bliss."

" On the assumption that as I can afford to pay for fifty dinners a day, I ought to be able to eat them. Not a bad proposition. Why should not a man be capable of eating fifty dinners if he can get them ? Is there a more pleasurable sensation than that of eating good things ? "

" I may think so," said father, " but I will grant you that many do not."

" Which means that like is made for like ; but as we are like no one thing, but seem to be the affinity, the component part of everything that interests us, you will understand that we should quickly tire of even fifty dinners *per diem*. The beggar who has health and a hearty appetite yearns for the money bags of Croesus ; and poor old Croesus, who hasn't

a sound tooth in his head, who cannot even digest a nightingale's tongue, who is never, sleeping or waking, free from some pain, some annoyance, feels that he wouldn't mind changing places with the beggar."

"And to what does all this unfathomable talk tend?"

"That you are more to be envied than I, and that I was never so jealous of any man as I am of you."

"You're joking, surely?" said father.

"A sorry joke. You have that for which I, with all my flocks and herds, sigh in vain—a loving family. There was only one creature in this world who could have made my wealth a real blessing, and she, God rest her, passed away before success had fairly crowned my efforts."

"Believe me," said father, and I could see that he was thinking of his own dear helpmate, his eyes grew so wondrously soft, "I can imagine your loss, and sympathize with your sorrow. But there is a

lot of happiness in life, even for the most despondent, if they will search diligently for it. Come now, reflect. Fate has been kinder to you than to the generality of her sons. Go down on your knees and thank her.”

“And yet to me my reward does not seem to exceed my deserts.”

“Nor would the purple of the world seem out of place on the shoulders of an emperor — to him, at least. What it would seem to the world is another matter. Not that I blame the human craving for more, more! It is that which has kept the world spinning all these centuries. It is that which has invented steamships, railways, telegraphs, telephones, and our whole catalogue of earthly wonders. The spirit of man is like the universe it inhabits—boundless, infinite; an animal one minute, a God the next. That it shall never cease craving for the unattainable is the price it pays for its greatness.”

“Then you think it would be wise if

we were all to try and make the best of what we have?"

"There is no little reason in such philosophy."

"Ah, my dear fellow," said Mr. Langton, "it may be within the bounds of reason, but it is beyond the bounds of practicability. Give a man gold, and he strives for power; give him power, and he yearns for power unlimited; give a woman a necklace of stars, and she will sigh for the sun as a pendant to it. Satisfaction is an unknown word, or at least an unexperienced sensation."

"And still I repeat, you ought to be satisfied."

"Ought to be, and is—two different things, aren't they? Not that I really have much cause to grumble, only I like to talk. Old men, like old women, were ever noted for their garrulity. Fred's a bit of a bother to be sure, and seems to be rushing to the dogs with express speed. If the rascal wasn't so like his mother, I'd disinherit him to-morrow. These young

fellows little think, as they throw their gold about, what trouble it cost their fathers to gain it."

" You know the saying in reference to putting old heads on young shoulders. The world was old before our young days, Langton. Yet, you see, I am here. The knowledge of my mistake may act as a slight deterrent to my son in some few things, but the broader paths of life he will have to walk for himself."

" I suppose so, though it seems incredible that it should be so, considering how much we might teach them. But Will there looks strong enough to trudge any road—isn't that so, William ? "

Will said he was not afraid to face the great conundrum of the future.

" I should think not," said Mr. Langton. " You're all right, Will, while you keep those brawny arms and that straight back of yours. And Flossie there, she too has her hopes, I can see. Come, come, don't blush, child. You shall be pretty enough for him, never fear. But

where's my dreamer, my young poet, all this time ? ”

“ His back is bad,” I said. “ He is in bed.”

“ Poor poet. He is a great sufferer ? ”

“ Great, sir.”

“ May I see him ? ”

“ Oh, yes.”

So the good squatter, extracting a book from his pocket, for he never forgot to bring Harold some sort of present, rose from his seat and went into the house with father.

As soon as they were gone, Will looked at me and began to grin.

“ He's a queer old chap, isn't he ? ”

“ He's a dear old man,” said I somewhat indignantly.

“ Yes, of course,” says Master Will, still grinning furiously, “ but don't you think ?—” Here he stopped and tapped his forehead significantly.

“ How dare you ! You ought to be ashamed of yourself ! ”

“ Well, you know, Flos, he can't be too

securely tiled. Did you ever hear such talk, such a lot of arrant nonsense out of Bedlam?"

"I was never in Bedlam," I answered rather airily, "so cannot say." And I bowed to him, thereby implying a compliment of a dubious nature.

"Bedlam or no Bedlam," he replied, "if that's the sort of rubbish they've been shooting into little Harry, I don't wonder the poor boy has taken to poetry."

"I'm afraid I shall never be able to pity you for a similar falling away."

"Don't you be sarcastic, miss. I like poor little Harry as much as any of you, and no one would feel prouder than I of his success; but if Mr. Langton is the fountain from which he draws his inspiration, I begin to tremble."

"You are a very foolish fellow, Will, and don't in the least understand human nature. Do you for one moment suppose that Harold is going to swallow everything that comes along? And don't

you know that man is a talking animal ; also, that he is not without some touch of the peacock ? Do you follow me ? ”

“ Of course I do ; but I’m hanged if you don’t beat about the bush as much as he does. Why don’t you out with a thing when you have it to say ? ”

“ When a sensible person has a thing to say he, or she, makes the most of it.”

“ To show off his cleverness ? ”

“ Will, you are too precipitous ; the possessor of too much bone and muscle.” But at the same time I could not help admiring his huge limbs, limbs which would be bigger yet and stronger too.

“ And not enough brain, eh, Impudence ? ”

“ You are as God made you,” I said sympathetically.

“ And not badly made either—at least so I’ve been told,” he added with a sly look. And stretching out his two big arms, he caught me round the waist and held me out as though I were a baby.

“ Peacock ! ” I cried, struggling to

free myself. "That girl is making a fool of you."

"Girl?" said he, assuming a look of wonder.

"Yes, Mr. Innocent. I know all about it, and everyone else knows that Polly Lane is the biggest flirt in Wallan."

"She's pretty, though," says he, the big idiot!

"Not half as pretty as Ella Wallace," I replied.

"Ah, but Ella's mother doesn't keep a pub," he answered nonchalantly. "You've no idea what a jolly place a pub is."

"No, I have not," I replied with some asperity.

"A cosy chair," he continued, unheeding my remark, "a pipe, a glass and a pretty girl. What more can the heart of man desire?"

"Much, I should think."

"But you are not a man."

"If I were, I should be ashamed to

own that my aspirations rose no higher than the bubbles on a pint pot."

" You are forgetting the pipe and the girl. But that reminds me, Flos. I heard over there," nodding towards Wallan, and meaning, of course, the "Shearer's Rest," over whose beer-taps the siren Polly Lane presided, "that Captain Fred had lost heavily on the Cup. I suppose it was that to which Mr. Langton referred just now ? "

" Probably."

" He must be an awfully wild fellow, Flos. Keeps a racing stable and the Lord knows what not. They say he dropped ten thousand to Bo Johnson over that one race. Lucky beggar ! "

" Lucky ! Why, the man must be a born idiot."

" Ah, you women don't understand," said he sapiently.

" I should think not."

" I mean, he's lucky to be able to lose ten thousand."

"Anybody could lose it, if they had it, and wanted to."

"Oh, you're hopeless. But here come the old people. I'm off." And with a knowing smile he darted from my side and disappeared round the corner of the house. Poor old Will had had enough philosophy for one day.

This Captain Fred, of whom he had made mention, was Mr. Langton's only son, and, if report erred not, would one day inherit his father's vast wealth. We saw little of him at Wallan at any time, so that he was a sort of exaggerated myth to most of us, but rumours of his wild doings in Melbourne reached us at odd intervals, intensified, no doubt, by repetition and distance. I know we all regarded him as a very terrible sort of person, but then in Wallan we were a simple race of beings, and really knew nothing of the people who lived in the world of great cities. We had our race week once a year; a race ball usually wound up the festive proceedings; all the

rest of our lives was flat, stale and unprofitable. I think such girls as Polly Lane had the best of it in townships like ours. True, she drew beer and had to countenance much choice bush dialogue ; but, if rumour may be trusted, she had her moments of recompense. I know she was saucy enough to be happy, and I am likewise certain that she did her best to entice Will away from home, feeling sure that she only did it to pique me. Will thought my suspicions decidedly uncomplimentary to himself.

Captain Fred was an honorary captain of our local volunteers. He had a captain's uniform, and very naturally called himself after it, but whether he knew anything of military matters, or whether he ever attended drill, I cannot say. I know it was his custom to appear in uniform at the annual treat he gave the corps at Langton Station, but there, I have every reason to believe, his soldiering began and ended. He clung to the title, however, and whenever we saw his

name in the paper the "Captain" always preceded it. And how fond we Australians are of a title, and what won't we do to gain one—from our tradesmen to our politicians, who are also tradesmen. Our athletes are "professors," and each unskilled medico, who shames the title, writes "Doctor" in large letters all over his insignificant person. And what think you means all this frothy talk of imperialism and loyalty but the ulterior hope of gain? Loyalty to what, to whom? A man must be loyal to his own country before he prates of loyalty towards others. Pity it is that Australians do not govern Australia, though they too fall in adoration before the god of "honours." I wonder what we would think of ourselves if we had a few lords, and why we should not have them I am at a loss to comprehend. It is extremely aggravating that the British Government does not humour us in this also. They had better look to it if they want to pass Imperial Federation, for no

honest man could possibly think of pledging his country for a beggarly knighthood. We are quite English enough to worship the creation. So much, in fact, do we out-Herod Herod in this respect, that it has long been a considerable surprise to me why we do not manufacture a few batches of lords of our own—as they do in England, every year. Truly, our new creations might for a period pose as the butt of vulgar ridicule, but laughter is evanescent by nature, nor can people laugh for ever. In a year we should get used to them ; in a generation they would be blue-blooded. No one would laugh then. Really it is too absurd for a growing country, and one which entertains hopes of an independent nationality, to subject itself to the whims of a monarch (who is only human), or a prime minister, who, alas ! is only human too.

Not that I believe Captain Fred was any the worse for his little vanities. We love an honour, not for the thing itself, but because people honour us for it. And

who can deny that Captain does not sound better than Mr.? I am quite prepared to admit that it should not; that one is really as empty or as full as the other, but we cannot disguise the fact that it is not so common, and a superfine world fails to see anything attractive in common things.

So Mr. Frederick Langton was Captain Langton, and if it pleased him to be so bedecked, I really don't know that it did anyone else harm. We all called him Captain naturally enough, and I won't say the title did not enhance his reputation. It certainly raised him a little out of the commonplace; threw a sort of halo round his half-fabulous personality, added a charm, so to speak, to his vices and his virtues—if of the latter he ever had any. He certainly was a man to set an unsophisticated heart throbbing, for your scapegraces have a great charm for women, or rather girls, who are headless women. I had not seen Captain Fred above a dozen times, and had not seen

him at all for the last two years ; but I used to hear so much of him that I often caught myself wondering what manner of man he might be. There is something extremely fascinating in a rakish reputation, be it of man or woman. Like runs to like, I suppose. Still, the bad are never wholly bad ; neither are the good too good. If, however, Captain Fred was anything like his reputation, or what was left of it, he was one to set a young girl by the ears. Handsome he was—he certainly looked well in his photograph—and I have a vivid recollection of a pair of impudent blue eyes, and a heavy, well-curled moustache, but beyond that I had little to go on, except his reputation, and that, alas, was in such a dilapidated condition that I dared not venture far upon it.

Of his sister Maud, for he had a sister some four or five years younger than himself, I knew a little more, for she and I had often played and ridden together before—before I knew that I had any cause to be ashamed of my father. But I

recollect one day her governess putting the old question, "Was it true? etc." From that moment Maud Langton and I were only on bowing terms; outwardly we remained good friends, but our friendship had little warmth or geniality in it. I was not slow in guessing the reason of her coldness, and having no little pride of my own we soon came to a tacit understanding. Then she went away to Melbourne, to school. Afterwards she lived with some relations in Toorak, and I knew by the number of times her name graced the fashionable intelligence of the newspapers that she was a star of the higher heavens. I won't say I envied her, though, perhaps, that were a true definition of my feelings. Yet how could I help contrasting her lot with mine, though the action brought a thousand bitter thoughts to my heart, and the bitter tears to my eyes?

CHAPTER VI.

AND so one after the other rolled the days along, changeless except for the changing seasons. Ours was a very even, methodical life, and if we knew no great joy we experienced no deep sorrow. I suppose there are thousands who live the same dull, happy lives, for happy they are in their own uninteresting way. Happy the nation that has no history. Happy the people, too, say I. I sometimes forgot that I had one, and wished that I might forget it altogether. But that was not to be, worse luck ! Our miseries, like our vices, are too fond of us ever to part company.

Harold still went on with his verse-making and his reading. Poor boy, he could not walk much owing to his sad

affliction, but whenever the weather was fine (and sometimes in summer it was a little too fine), he would hobble across the paddock to the creek, and there would sit by the hour reading, and dreaming, no doubt, of the great verses he would write, and the fame which would one day be his. What a fairyland is this in which these young poets exist. A dream-life whose ways are strewn with roses, the odour of which, rising up to the brain, intoxicates the soul. What know they of the ways of the world and the harshness of man? Do they ever think of it, I wonder, these un-practical poets? Or do they hear the birds sing always, as they, too, bird-like, whirl through the summer air? They dream of fame, surely, but not as men dream of it. In their craving is no sordid thought, no vain, pretentious fluttering of the poetic wing. They have but one idea—to produce the beautiful, to make sweet music. As the birds sing, so sing they, till the elder birds peck them and they die.

Will went his way also, which was not that of Harold ; yet he was a good fellow through and through ; as strong as Harold was weak, as practical as the poet was dreamy. He was a great help to father now, and was given a pound a week pocket money, or wages, so that he was quite independent, and as a consequence he soon took unto himself the masculine air of importance. Not that he carried it off with very much dignity, for he could never be anything but a great, soft-hearted boy. I saw, with something much akin to fear, that his visits to Wallan did not decrease with his exalted status, and I doubted not that Polly Lane and the "Shearer's Rest" were the attraction. I dreaded that girl, and knew that she would like to do me an ill turn through him ; but he always laughed at me whenever I spoke of her, and told me that she was a profound admirer of mine.

" She knew that would please you, you booby," I said, for our family devotion was a by-word in the place.

"Don't be uncharitable, Flos," he replied. "Try to give the girl credit for being honest once in a way. Everybody knows that you are beautiful. She only spoke the truth."

"But I am not beautiful," I said in my vainness, not unwilling to hear my praises sung even by a brother's lips.

"By George, ain't you?" he said—he was never very particular in his choice of words, poor old Will! But in his eyes there was something better than the sound of sweet words. Dear old fellow! I wonder if all brothers and sisters love each other as we did? If so, how pleasant some portion of their lives must have been; in what a world of delightful memories they may revel when time has stiffened their joints and bade them sit down and think.

Of course I couldn't scold him any more after his flattering estimation of myself; it would have been like putting a knife into my own breast. Neither could I tell him how Ella had coaxed

me to speak, because she had forbidden me to mention her name. Poor Ella ! So I dismissed him with a warning against all red-haired girls ; at which he laughed and said her hair (meaning Polly Lane's) was golden ; kissed me and pointed out that my own shone with a reddish tinge in the sunlight, and then read me a warning against myself, which, in the light of after events, reads somewhat like a prophecy. But I understand you now, Will. Dear old fellow, you knew more of the world than I, clever as I thought myself.

One Sunday, shortly after this abortive attempt of mine to lead Will into the narrow way, the Wallaces, mother and father, Arthur and Ella, drove over in a body and took Granite Creek by storm. Arthur was going to Melbourne on the morrow to enter the university, and so it was decided that we should all dine together and wish him God-speed. We were all awaiting them on the verandah when they drove up in their nice new

pair-horse buggy, and while Will and Arthur took the team round to the stables, I led Ella away to my room, mother showing a like attention to Mrs. Wallace, who, as I have already mentioned, had been her friend and companion in her young days in England. And how delighted they always seemed when they met—as though they had been parted for years. Mother used to say that the sight of her friend's sweet face reminded her so much of the old, happy days ; and then she would suddenly check herself and smile, and wonder how she could have been happy without her children. Poor thing ! I see with different eyes now. What knew I then, what could I even guess, of the misery which had been hers, the dull hopelessness more bitter than the sharpest pain ? She never complained ; she had always a kiss and a smile for us children, a sad smile, truly, but, oh, so sweet. To father she was the calm, serious helpmate, the holy lover. Soft of speech, tender, solicitous ; never did I

know them speak angrily to each other ; no shadow of a frown ever came between them. She, knowing what he had suffered, strove hard to lighten his burden, and he, forgetting nothing of the debt he owed her, worshipped the very ground she walked on. Often of an evening, as we all sat round the fire, he in one corner reading, she in the other plying her busy needle, have I seen him drop his book, look steadily at her till his eyes grew dim, and then, rising, walk over to her and take her dear head between his hands and kiss her as he must have kissed her in the days when they knew no sorrow. What would their lives have been under happier circumstances ? Could they have loved each other more, would they even have been happier ? Perhaps not. To me it seems as though this thing we call sorrow, sad and pitiful though it be, were the one thing requisite to insure man the eternal peace of heaven. Through sorrow, by sorrow, and out of sorrow come all things glorious ;

the sad symbol is it which veils the tidings of great joy. Only can the heart thoroughly rejoice when it has emerged from the black clouds of despair. For the joy of nations was not the Cross uplifted on the Hill of Calvary?

Upon returning to the verandah we found the little party seated in easy chairs chatting amiably and eating peaches. Mr. Wallace was loudly dilating on the beautiful proportions of his new buggy, which had only arrived from Melbourne that week, while mother and Mrs. Wallace sustained a separate conversation on their own account. Will and Arthur were in the far corner of the verandah, also eating peaches, but looking very serious. At least Arthur was, for his dark face looked darker and gloomier than usual.

"Poor Arthur," said I to Ella, "how serious he looks."

"Yes, poor boy," she answered mysteriously.

"I suppose most people feel rather

queer when they leave home for the first time?"

"If that were all," she said, "I wouldn't mind it so much."

"All! What else can it be? He is anticipating home-sickness already," and I'm afraid I laughed somewhat heedlessly at the thought.

"How can you, Flossie! You seem to forget that Arthur is a man now."

"Yes, I suppose he is. How strange it seems, doesn't it? Why, I can shut my eyes and fancy that it was only the other day we went quong-dong hunting together."

"He is twenty," said she, as though that were a patriarchal age.

"Of course; and is about to enter the university, and become a famous physician. Fancy old Arthur famous."

"Why shouldn't he be!" she exclaimed reproachfully.

"Of course; why shouldn't he be? I hope he may be."

"Then why don't you tell him so?"

"I suppose I never thought of it."

I saw the pained look shoot across her face, and it at once struck me that I had been more than unsympathetic. Before I could explain, or get an explanation, however, Mr. Wallace called me to him, and my thoughts were immediately diverted into another channel.

He was singularly like Arthur in appearance, though the finely-chiselled face of the boy was here enlarged and coarse. The eyes were the same, though, and I doubt not but that the chin would have been as like, could I have seen it for the brindled beard which hid it. The mouth, too, was cut in the same firm way, though the lips had not the full curl of the boy's. They used to say that thin mouth of his could look very cruel at times, and I have heard more than one story of the hard bargains he was wont to drive. I know not if they were true: perhaps there was some grain of truth in them. I know he was proud, not altogether purse-proud, but pompous like most successful men. That, however, is one of those

petty weaknesses to which humanity is susceptible ; it concerns us little. He was never hard to me or mine, and if he indulged in the “gentlemanly vice” of avarice (perhaps traceable to his Caledonian descent), as some said he did, it concerned him only. To us he was always amiable, the best of friends. As father and husband he was irreproachable — no mean catalogue of recommendations.

“Come and sit beside me, Flossie,” he said, “and let me think that I’m a boy again. It isn’t often, you know, that I get the opportunity of making love to such a fairy.”

“Whose fault is that?” I answered, entering into and enjoying the banter, for among Mr. Wallace’s many qualities might be reckoned his love of a joke.

“My own, truly,” he replied with a mock sigh. “What a depraved wretch I must be to shut the gates of Paradise on myself.”

At this there was a general laugh,

though I could see that father did not receive the nonsense with much favour.

" You have not forgotten how to turn a pretty speech," he said ; and though he smiled, it was not too gaily. " If Florence were like other girls, I should tremble for her vanity."

" Vanity," exclaimed Mr. Wallace, " is an excellent thing, and knows how to take care of itself. Don't you tremble for vanity, Hastings. It is the stream which sends this mill-wheel of a world buzzing ; the life and soul of the universe. Keep vanity well in hand, as you would a partly-broken colt, and behold we have pride, emulation, and, indirectly, genius, immortality." And at the conclusion of this magnificent outburst he turned to father with a triumphant look. Father smiled, but answered not. Perhaps he did not take such a broad-minded view of the subject as his friend ; perhaps, too, knowing Mr. Wallace of old, he thought it would be a futile business to attempt to argue with a man who continually held

himself up as a successful example of his own argument. No matter what the subject might be, Mr. Wallace would introduce into it his own personality, and from such premises would argue that such and such must be correct. "I made money easily; therefore money is easily made." When a man takes this tone there is no gainsaying him.

"I think your idea of vanity differs slightly from the general meaning of the word," said mother slowly.

"And pray how?" exclaimed Mr. Wallace, cocking up his ears, ever ready for an encounter.

"By it we mean something contemptible, shallow, conceited. Pride, on the other hand, is a noble quality."

"My dear madam," was the airy answer, "they are six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. Vanity, pride, and arrogance—a hair's-breadth don't divide 'em. Vanity in the great is emulation, ambition; ambition in the vulgar is vanity. Punctilious sticklers may rave

about the precise shade of meaning, but I say they're triplets, nothing more nor less. Now take me as an example, a successful example—" But we were luckily spared any further panegyrics on the great Me by the timely arrival of our cook, who brought the welcome intelligence that dinner was ready. So into the house we trooped, for whereas argument, transcendental or otherwise, can keep, the dinner rapidly goes cold.

We did not entertain very often, but when we did we strove to make a creditable show, and on this occasion the table, if it did not actually groan under the good things—which I have often read of tables doing—seemed to rejoice in the splendour that bedecked it. Father sat at the head with Mrs. Wallace on his right hand, mother at the foot with Mr. Wallace on her right hand and Harold on her left. Then came Arthur and I, Ella and Will. Cook, we called her "cook," though she was only a "general," flustered about with a face like a bit of beet, puffing and

blowing like a porpoise and looking as though she were slowly melting in the heat ; while the young girl whom we had engaged for the day, a farmer's daughter entirely ignorant of service, went about dropping the potatoes on the floor and chipping our best bits of china. Still it was a great feast, a feast for the gods, as Mr. Wallace more than once declared ; and, by the manner in which we manipulated our knives and forks, I have good reason for believing we did it justice—that is, all except poor Arthur, who seemed to be neither in appetite nor spirits.

When the meal was over Ella and I put on our hats and strolled away down to the creek, and as we walked I could not help referring to Arthur's constrained manners, a reference which did not altogether please her, for she said something about people having no sympathy and caring little what became of “poor boys” ; all of which, being so much Greek to me, I passed over with a smile, as people will

a quotation in French which they do not understand.

"Will, too," she remarked, as though she were about to pay me back in my own coin, "seemed so unlike the Will of old times that I should have thought he was going away as well."

"Perhaps he is," said I mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" The question came rather hurriedly.

"He has not stopped going to Wallan yet," I answered with a meaning look, enjoying her consternation and being ignorant of the real pain I was inflicting.

"Was he there last week?"

"Every day."

"And he never called on us once?" This she uttered very sorrowfully.

"You don't keep the 'Shearer's Rest,'" said I.

"I wish we did."

I could not help laughing outright.
"What would papa say to that?"

"Do you think," she said, and her hand slipped into mine, and her earnest eyes

sought mine, “do you think that he—that he really cares for her?”

“No,” I answered decidedly, seeing that consolation was sorely required, “how could he?”

“But she is pretty.”

“She is freckled.”

“I know it, but what are a few freckles? Besides, they say she is not very particular.”

“Oh, but he is.”

And yet, strange to say, she did not seem to get as much consolation from this statement as might reasonably have been expected; so I continued to dilate upon Will’s lofty nature and elevated principles, showing off against them, in a very unbecoming and unflattering guise, Miss Polly Lane’s many infirmities. To all of which poor Ella listened with a resignation which was almost pitiful; and as much as I had hitherto disliked the alluring syren of the “Shearer’s Rest,” I now felt that dislike was too mild a word to give adequate expression to my feelings.

Here, however, what further conversation we might have indulged in on this painful topic was brought to a hasty conclusion by the sudden arrival of Will and Arthur.

" You're a queer pair," cried the former as he came rushing up. " What did you want to run away like this for? Arthur and I have been looking for you everywhere."

" We wanted to talk," said I.

" Talk," he echoed. " What can girls find to talk about? "

" What can't they, you mean. Oh, lots of things, from the latest fashion to the 'Shearer's Rest.' "

He looked at me rather quizzingly and asked me what I meant.

" Nothing," I answered with a laugh and walked on with Arthur, leaving him and Ella to follow at their own sweet will and explain matters if they chose.

For a time Arthur and I walked on in silence, he looking everywhere but at me, I stealing furtive glances at him, for in

these little matters I fully believe the woman is invariably more self-possessed than the man. And I account for it, not through any physical superiority on her part, but simply because she need do nothing but hold her head down, blush or simper, while he makes most exhaustive and ridiculous efforts to escape the bog into which he has floundered. Then again, unless he should happen to know his subject, or make a very accurate guess, he is apt to begin operations on one who will not be operated upon. Confusion worse confounded naturally ensues, and the poor fellow cuts a lamentable figure as he beats an ignominious retreat. Amusing enough to the onlooker ; but, said the frogs, what is play to you is death to us. Instinct, however, is man's unfailing guide ; a sort of Southern Cross in his volatile firmament—fixed, perhaps the only thing unchangeable about him. Let him follow this and it will rarely lead him astray ; otherwise he is a blind creature.

That poor Arthur had something troublesome on his mind I could tell by the sympathetic throbings of my own heart. I more than half-suspected what it was, and grew a trifle flurried in consequence, for no matter how little a girl may care for a man, the fact of his loving her must make him seem different from other men.

"I suppose you know I am going to-morrow?" he said at last.

Poor boy! Of course I did. Hadn't I known it for more than a month?

"Oh, yes," I answered, "and I suppose you are glad to go?"

"For some things, yes, though for others I am sorry."

"Sorry! How can you be sorry when you are going away under such favourable conditions? If you work hard you may get your degree before you are twenty-five, and then think how proud we shall all be of you."

"Will you be proud of me?" he said,

quite boldly I thought, and not at all like Arthur.

“ Of course,” I answered with a smile, “ as proud of you as though you were my own brother.”

He turned away with an impatient gesture.

“ But I am not your brother.”

“ I have always thought of you as one,” I answered maliciously ; “ but if you wish to disown the relationship—”

“ I do wish to disown it.”

“ As you please.”

“ Because I wish to claim a nearer.”

He now began to get very red in the face, and his earnest eyes seemed to look right through me. He stammered, too, quite painfully, and I could see that the poor fellow was in a state of the most acute agitation. I believe I grew half afraid myself. Anyway, the laugh that accompanied the question, “ A nearer ? ” was more than half hysterical.

“ Yes,” he repeated, “ a nearer. Have

you, truly, never thought of me as anything but a brother?"

"Of what else should I think of you?" I asked, nervously.

"As a lover," he said, trying to take my hand.

"Oh, no! not that," and I drew back with a slight gesture of pain.

"I was afraid you had not."

For a moment he looked at me with eyes so full of tenderness that I felt my heart thump, thump with a sudden longing to throw myself at his feet and beg his forgiveness; but at that moment the loud voice of Will broke in upon me, and the good impulse died away.

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That night the Wallaces drove home by moonlight, but before their setting-out Arthur found me alone in the garden.

"I don't know when I shall see you again," he said, "but you won't forget me, Flos, will you?"

"Of course not. What makes you think of such a thing?"

“ You are not angry, then ? ”

“ Oh, no.”

“ Brother or lover,” he whispered in a low, excited voice, “ I am always yours, yours for ever, body and soul. Don’t forget that, will you ? ”

“ Hush, hush ! You must not talk like this.”

He laughed in a grim sort of way, but continued, “ I’ve had my old silver ring made into two—a small one and a large one. I want you to accept the smaller as a keepsake. It’s not worth much as a gift—not what I’d like to give you—but in days to come you may prize it as a remembrance. Will you have it ? ”

I did not like taking it, but, being ashamed to refuse, assented. He slipped the thin silver band over my engagement finger, whether by design or accident I do not know, then lifting my hand to his lips kissed it passionately.

CHAPTER VII.

AND so slowly the days ran themselves into weeks, the weeks to months, and all the while we led the same dull, objectless sort of existence : rising in the morning and going through our allotted toil—whatever it might be—eating, and going to bed again. True, I never expected to see a new sun every day, but I none the less grew tired of watching the old one sail across the great plains and go down night after night behind the big trees by the creek. I used to wonder if my lot was ever going to change, or if I was doomed henceforth to live only as the shadowy atom of a woman ; a creature who grew lean or fat, long or short as the sun rose or sank, as the clouds fluttered overhead. I had in my nature all the youthful craving for

change, a craving which we women, or women such as I was then, cannot gratify without risking much. Poor little fool ! And yet how can one know till one has learnt ?

Will, who had much of my nature, who was, in fact, a masculine me, having no sexual restraint upon him, felt not the dreariness of our life with an equal intensity, or if he did his reputation sadly belied him ; for with shame must I own that he had lately developed a most pronounced partiality for certain persons at Wallan who shall be nameless in these pages. Mother, I am glad to say, never knew half the things they said of her handsome boy, though if she had it is ten to one she would have rejected them as unworthy of credence. He was still her boy, though he now turned the scale at thirteen stone seven and stood over six feet high, and he would be her boy even when his hair was grey and he had sons and daughters of his own. It was a source of much distress to me to hear of what

they called his loose ways, for I not unnaturally thought that our dreadful heritage might make him reckless and hurry him to the dogs. And yet I never wholly believed it, for there was always consolation in his kind words and his loving ways, and whenever I saw him stretched out at mother's feet, his head in her lap, as though he were a boy again, I knew that the poison had not yet entered his blood.

As for Harold, he seemed to take little note of the changeless days. It always broke the monotony for him if he were well enough to hobble down to the creek and back, and his journeyings round the garden of a morning were an invariable source of delight. No flower bloomed, no leaf appeared which escaped his eager eye, and I verily believe that he was intimately acquainted with each particular weed. There in the old summer-house, with the roses and the grapes growing within reach of his hand, would he sit by the hour reading his favourite authors, or

conning carefully his own hopeful verses. But he suffered much in those days, poor boy, and his beautiful face grew paler and paler, and, though he would not own it, his hopes more feeble. "Oh, if I could only write one verse," he would say, "one verse that will live when I am gone." It was a modest enough wish as you meant it, Harold, but, ah, what a wish! It almost broke my heart to see his pitiable resignation, so sadly hopeful, and yet so surely hopeless. Poor boy. And when they sent back those first verses with the curt information that they were "not suitable"! Not suitable, forsooth! I should think not when they had never printed any real poetry in their rag of a newspaper. But no one ever knew save you and me. We were not going to let the world into all our secrets. Yet we had our revenge, didn't we, when the big Melbourne weekly inserted your "Ode to a Butterfly"? It was worth having our disappointment to experience such a pleasure; nay, without that disappoint-

ment the pleasure would have been but the ghost of a sensation. There was hope then that the first great Australian poet was born. What castles we built, what cities reared on the airy foundations of our exultant hope. Alas ! what knew we of the world and the world's ways ? Alas ! that hope too, like us, should be born to sorrow to pass away in pain.

Of mother and father little need here be said. They lived the same peaceful life, only, if anything, they were quieter in their ways, more reserved than they had ever been. It was only when Mr. Langton came over to Granite Creek that father seemed to shake off his great depression. Then, waking up as it were, he would be as brilliant, courteous and affable as in the old days, and Mr. Langton would go away vowing that Hastings was the happiest man in the world. Happy ! and every day that sad face was growing sadder, and the once muscular and upright figure now owned a perceptible stoop. To me he seemed like a man who

thought too much ; a dreamer of dreams, and not too pleasant ones either. How could they be ? What had he not lost by that one act of madness ? Better, perhaps, had his blow proved fatal. It would have been a short shrift then—and oblivion. No years of painful penance ; no tears that could not wash away the past ; no children of sorrow. He was never the same after his confession. I think it broke his pride—annihilated his dignity. He had been father, protector, god : but with his own hand he had shattered the idol. It seemed as though he could no more believe in it himself.

I saw Arthur but once during this period. It was when he came home for the Christmas holidays. He was doing famously at the University, so he told me, and hoped to gain his degree without a single plucking. Of course, I congratulated him on his success, and hoped that it might continue ; but nothing of a nearer nature passed between us. He did not even mention his ring, and I, because I

had long since ceased to wear it, never broached the subject, although I was not slow to observe that he too was without his half. Of Ella, I saw, as usual, a great deal, and while she was lamenting Will's backsliding, I was chafing, fool-like, against the restraint of the curb, forgetting that but for that restraint, we fools of women would too often dash ourselves to pieces.

But change was coming now with a vengeance. That for which I had yearned so long was close at hand. The orchestra had struck its last chord; a moment's silence as of the grave was to follow. Anon the little bell will ring out—that same soft tinkle heralds in comedy or tragedy—and by some mysterious process the unwieldy curtain uplifts itself and the stage is laid bare. I wonder how we shall like the play?

One day a man rode hastily up to Granite Creek and inquired for father. He had ridden with all dispatch from Langton Station. Mr. Langton was ill,

very ill, dying he (the man) believed, and he had expressed a wish to see father. The news came like a thunderclap to us all ; we plied the man with numerous questions, but could elicit little other information from him. He seemed to know nothing but that Mr. Langton was ill, and that he had been sent to acquaint Mr. Hastings of the fact. So father, even while the fellow was speaking, jumped on the messenger's horse and galloped away at break-neck speed, the man himself following leisurely some half-hour after on father's big roan.

After some three hours of anxious waiting father returned looking extremely dejected, and we immediately guessed the worst. Nor were our guesses erroneous. Mr. Langton was no more.

"He was unconscious when I got there," father explained, "and never rallied again."

"Then he did not recognize you?" said mother.

"No, poor fellow. He opened his eyes

the moment before he died, but they were glassy and vacant-looking, and already dead."

And then he told us how it all came about; how three days previously Mr. Langton had been thoroughly drenched while riding from Boorta to Wallan, and had thereby caught a severe chill which rapidly developed into acute pneumonia.

"Why did they not send for you sooner?" said mother.

"He wanted me," was the reply, "but the doctor would not hear of it. Afraid that I might agitate the patient, or some such nonsense. He, however, told me that Mr. Langton had appeared exceedingly anxious about my lease of Granite Creek, and had spoken of making it over to me entirely. But of course nothing was done, and all he said was naturally looked upon as so much wandering talk."

"Poor man, to die with no one near him whom he loved."

"I have often heard him declare that it is the way all rich people die. But the

doctor telegraphed to his children, and they are expected here this evening."

So the good squatter was gone at last. It seemed incredible that that apparently healthy man should disappear from the face of things so suddenly. Only a week before he and father had sat on the verandah for over an hour arguing Plato and the immortality of the soul, and now —well, he now knew as much about the soul as Plato. I think it always a hard fact to realize that people are dead; dumb, still, cold eternally. We miss them, and we shall never see them again, at least while this earthly shell holds together; and yet I often think they are not dead, for with an effort of memory I can bring them before me, and see them smile, and hear the tones of their well-beloved voice. And what are these intangible ghosts, these perfect shades of nothingness? Fancy, of course, an effort of the imagination. Nothing more?

Out of respect to the deceased, father, Will and I went to the funeral, and, if I

may be allowed so to speak, a great affair it was ; the biggest thing ever seen in Wallan. People flocked in from all the country round, many out of respect, but more out of curiosity ; for there was not likely to be such another display in Wallan for many a day to come. Certainly there had never been one like it before. It was estimated that the vehicles alone stretched over half a mile—and a curious collection of craft they were—while a *queue* of pedestrians, another half mile in length, plodded on in the dust of the wheels. With one thing, however, I was particularly impressed, and that was the decorum preserved by this huge crowd. To all it seemed to be the one serious moment of their lives. Men whose reputation for wildness was the talk of the district, here showed how like other men they were. Perhaps, even they too thought of the day that was to come.

I did not see Maud Langton at the funeral, and learnt afterwards that she had not followed her father's remains to

their last resting-place, but Captain Fred was there decked out in all the trappings of woe, which, however, did not detract from his *interesting* personality. Yes, even surrounded by every sign and symbol of woe, I could find a thought for a man's appearance. But then, was he not a curiosity, a fabulous hero to us; a sort of mystery and terror, a forbidden luxury like the tree of knowledge? Too like, alas!

After the ceremony the more intimate, or, I might say, the more respectable acquaintances of the deceased drove back to the house and were there most lavishly regaled with a plentiful supply of choice funeral baked-meats, and if the majority of the good folk did not thoroughly enjoy themselves, there is no sign by which we may detect enjoyment. I know I was so vastly amused watching the antics of the masticating crowd, that I did not perceive, until father touched me on the arm, that Captain Langton had joined us.

"My daughter," said father presenting me.

"Daughter. By Jove!" And he looked at me so intently that I had to bow low to hide my confusion.

"You have forgotten her, I suppose?" said father.

"I'm afraid I must plead guilty," he said with an apologetic look at me. "Is it possible that this is the little girl who used to play with Maud?"

"The same," said father.

"By George, how she's grown."

I thought the conversation was veering to a somewhat personal point, so I walked over to Will, who stood a couple of yards away, and asked him some silly question, thereby showing my resentment.

"Your son, I suppose," I heard him say to father, for my thoughts were on him as well as my back.

"Yes."

"By Jove, how like each other they are." And I knew his eyes were watching me all the while.

Presently father approached us.

"Captain Langton wishes to reintroduce us to his sister," said he. But neither Will nor I moved. I had not forgotten the old days, and I was prouder now. Will had not forgotten them either.

"Flos feels faint," he said, "I must take her out on the verandah first."

"By all means," interposed the Captain, "I will bring my sister to you."

Will gave me his arm and led me through the crowded room.

"There," said he, as soon as we had reached the open air, "I hope he will understand that we don't want to curry favour of him. If I were you, Flos, I wouldn't be introduced to her."

"I don't care one way or the other," I replied. "She is, or can be, nothing to me. But after all she was only a girl then, and perhaps she may wish to forget, so why shouldn't I?"

Will growled out something about my being put upon, and looked very cross. He wouldn't be patronized himself and

he wouldn't have me patronized, and he'd be—what followed was lost in an inarticulate gurgle, for at that moment Captain Langton and father approached with Maud between them, and I saw old Will's look of resentment change to one of uneasy wonder.

Tall of figure and shapely in outline, with a pale, calm and very beautiful face, Maud Langton looked, as she stepped gracefully towards us, as fair a picture of young womanhood as one could wish to see. There was no sign of tears in her lustrous eyes; no red or swollen lids proclaimed the misery she must have endured. She looked as placid as though there were no such thing as woe, and grief were an unknown term. And yet with it all I thought of her as a most melancholy figure; in her movements there was an indescribable motion of sorrow, which the heavy crape dress she wore, though it showed off the exquisite whiteness of her skin and the unusual shimmer of her hair, deeply accentuated.

"This is my daughter," said father, and there was a proud ring in his voice as he spoke.

"My old playfellow," said she, coming forward and shaking me by the hand. "What a time it seems since we last saw each other."

"Longer, indeed," thought I, "than there was any necessity for."

But I returned her pressure of the hand and smiled back at her, though I could not forget why we had parted so long before.

"And this," said father turning to her, "is my son Will. You must remember him?"

"Do you mean to say," said she in her languid way, turning her wonderful eyes full upon old Will, who looked none too comfortable under the scrutiny, "that this is the boy who used to ride as though he had no neck to break?"

Father smiled and said he was afraid Will was somewhat reckless in his young days, but that her surmise was substan-

tially correct. As for poor old Will, he blushed as furiously as any schoolgirl, and muttered that he believed he did ride very foolishly as a boy, but that boys really never knew the meaning of the word "fear."

"Nor," said she, "if one may judge by appearances, should I think it occasioned you much concern now."

Will smiled and said he didn't think it did. But there, he was sure to please the women with his handsome face and his great loose limbs, for to a woman is there not something wonderfully fascinating in that physical strength which never can be hers?

"But did you not have another son?" said she presently. "A little cripple, was he not?"

"Yes," said father in a low voice, which conveyed a distinct reproach, "I have a son who met with an unfortunate accident."

"Poor little fellow," said she, but though her voice was pitched in a softer

key it entirely lacked feeling. There was a languid, patronizing ring in it which I thought peculiarly offensive. And yet it might have been only my thought, which had not yet forgotten the past ; for when she turned to her brother and spoke she addressed him in precisely the same manner. Perhaps it was her style ; perhaps again the sadness of the gathering was not without its effect. It could not well be otherwise. The wonder was how she bore up so well. She was a lonely girl after all, and what she had done to me in the old days had nothing to do with the present. So I talked to her of her father, and told her how fond we all were of him, and how often he came to take tea with us, and of the many happy hours we had all spent together ; and as I spoke the tears came into her eyes for, I believe, the first time, and she declared that she had not been a very loving or dutiful daughter, and that she would never forgive herself for her selfish indifference. In five minutes—for when

they saw us walk aside the men very considerately quitted us—we had gone over much of the old ground, and in ten minutes she was imploring me to call her by her Christian name as before. “Let us be Maud and Flossie as we were of old,” she said. “I seem to be the most utterly lonesome creature in the world.”

I was not one to bear resentment, especially to one who seemed so sorely in need of help, and who held out the hand with the wish that bygones should be bygones. Moreover, how did I know that she had really intended to cut me? I had been sensitive of slights all my life, and when I knew that there was good cause for shame, I saw nothing but a perpetual insult. A look, a half-heard word, sent the blood rushing confusedly through my veins. I had always demanded more consideration than my position entitled me to, and when I knew that there was a real cause for slighting me, my demands increased; so that between one thing and

another I, at times, contrived to make my life a burden.

At length our trap drove round to the door, being one of the last to make its appearance, and Captain Fred and his sister came out on the verandah to see us off.

"You will come and see me soon, Flossie, will you not?" she said, as she bade me good-bye. "You know I shall be awfully wretched in this lonely place."

"You, I hope, will not forget us either," said the Captain, addressing father. "I know all about your life-long friendship with my father, and I trust that I may not be unworthy to fill his place in your good opinion."

"You may be sure," replied father as he shook the young man by the hand, "that my friend's son shall be mine, if he wishes it."

Then followed a general invitation to us all. Langton Station was a big place and desolate enough at the best of times; therefore, what was it likely to be now?

If we had any pity for them, we were implored to show it by coming over and cheering them up on every possible occasion ; and not until we promised, and let them know that there was some likelihood of our promise being kept, did they seem inclined to part with us. But at last away we went, and for quite half an hour none of us spoke a word, being, apparently, too full of thought. Of what father was thinking as he sat smoking his pipe, I cannot say for certain, though by the gloomy look on his face, I might easily have made a shrewd guess ; but of what Will and I thought, the following brief dialogue may, perhaps, afford a clue.

We had gone on, as I have said, for a long time in silence, when suddenly I exclaimed, unconsciously, it seems to me, "I am sure he is a much-wronged man."

"She is very beautiful, though," says Will.

At this we both looked up into each other's face and laughed confusedly.

CHAPTER VIII.

THAT night we were all strangely reticent concerning the funeral, which was the more surprising considering what a new experience it had been. I never knew old Will to be so silent, so preoccupied, while I, who had my full share of woman's garrulity, found it an almost intolerable nuisance to have to narrate, for Harold's benefit, the more important incidents of the ceremony. Did I see Captain Fred, and what did I think of him? Did he show any sign, bear any visible mark of being the terrible person he was generally represented to be? To all of which I in turn replied that to me he seemed an extremely amiable young man, and that I already discredited a

good half of the rumours which had reached us concerning him.

"Ah, Sis," cried he, looking at me in his shrewd way, and I do believe the boy was uncannily shrewd, "you must be careful, you know."

"Careful," I replied, assuming a look of innocence, "careful of what?"

He smiled roguishly as he answered, "Women, like moths, are attracted by glitter. The Marguerite scruples vanish in the glare of the Faust-like diamonds."

"What do you mean by that?" I exclaimed, trying to look indignant and feeling that I was playing my part exceedingly ill. "What do you know about women?"

"Great men were living before Agamemnon," quoted he with an impish look. "I have read, my sister."

"Filled your head with a lot of rubbish," said I.

"Not all rubbish, either," says he with a tantalizing look. "But come, tell me

some more about this wonderful creature."

"I will tell you nothing," said I. "You are laughing at me."

"Not at you, Flos ; only with you."

"Then if you will kindly tell me where the joke comes in, I shall be glad to laugh too," I answered, rather crossly.

"Really," he said, "one would think I had been trying to shatter a day-dream ; I who live in dreams, and by dreams, and with dreams. And Maud—did you see her ?"

"Yes."

"Well, would you mind telling me what you think of her ?"

"Ask Will," said I. "He seemed to be not a little impressed with what he saw."

"Is that so, Will, old fellow ?" cried he to that young giant, who was walking pensively up and down with a pipe in his mouth—for he had now been smoking before father for the last six months.

"What's that ?" says the giant, emitting a huge cloud of smoke from his jaws.

“ Flos tells me that you were not a little impressed with a certain young lady to whom you were recently introduced.”

“ Eh, what ? ” says Will, looking a little confused. “ Oh, yes. A clinker, Harry, by George ! Such a face, and figure, and style ! By George, that’s what I call style. Thorough-bred all over.”

“ Beats Polly Lane ? ” suggested Harold in his quiet way.

“ A baker’s hack and a Cup winner,” says Will.

“ She is beautiful, then ? ”

“ Isn’t she, by George ! ”

That “ by George ” of Will’s expressed a lot, though I always considered it showed a decided lack of imagination. Yet the way he rang the changes on it, making it now tender, now furious, and now singularly impressive, was, in itself, a display of no mean order. These catchwords, however, if they are apt to grow monotonous, have this advantage over a variety of epithets ; that whereas the latter are often more forcible than polite,

the former retain their unaffected purity. Thus, indirectly, is the person speaking, and the person spoken to, benefited to an appreciable extent, for the ears of the one are never polluted, and the soul of the other is never placed in jeopardy.

"I should like to see her," said Harold.

"You'll write your finest poem after you have seen her, take my word for it."

The poor poet smiled sadly. "What have I to do with women?" he said. "They like men, Will." And he glanced meaningfully at his brother's splendid frame.

"Do you think they haven't a soul above flesh and blood?" says Will almost indignantly.

"I try not to think about it, old fellow," was the weary answer. "There is only one woman for me, but she is a goddess, and the ancients called her a muse."

"This one is a goddess too," said Will, drawing seriously at his pipe.

"Smoke," said I, appropriately enough, for I did not altogether relish the thought

of any woman creeping in and cutting me out.

“Right, Sis,” said Harold, “let us blow it away like good children.” And seizing his crutches he arose and hobbled off down the garden to indulge in a good think. Poor little Harold ! Martyr-like he bore his sufferings, and he was never known to rail aloud at his destiny ; but when he made use of such expressions as “They like *men*, Will,” there would come into his eyes a look so full of anguish, of wretchedness so unspeakable, that every pulse within me used to palpitate with pity. “Look at Will,” he would say sometimes, “as beautifully symmetrical as the Apollo Belvedere” (of course he had read all about those sort of things), “while I—” It seemed as though even he dared not express his own thought. Not that I think he was envious of Will, for the word “envy” conveys the meaning of something despicable. We may yearn for the crown of glory without wishing to

drag it from the head of our brother. He would not rob Will of his strength, though he might cry out against his own ill-fortune. Yet I have often caught his eye wandering over his brother's form with an intensity absolutely painful. In those moments I knew a very volcano of desire burnt luridly beneath that frail earthly shell, only the glare of which shone out through his wonderful eyes ; bright lightning flashes which seared with fire the dark background of his life. What he suffered then no earthly tongue could tell. Such moments, known only to himself, made life well-nigh intolerable. "At such a time," said he, "I too, like Job of old, could curse God and die."

On the second day after the funeral Captain Langton and his sister rode over to Granite Creek, and as their arrival was totally unexpected they rather upset our little household. I know I was taken utterly by surprise, for hearing the clatter of hoofs and the barking of dogs I rushed

out on the verandah with my big cook's apron on (for I was making a quince and apple pie at the time—a delicacy, especially when prepared by me, which was much appreciated by the family), and found myself face to face with our distinguished visitors. I suppose I blushed deeply—I know I felt very confused—but as a retreat in order was out of the question, I faced the four gleaming guns (of eyes) with what dignity I could command. After all, the making of a quince and apple pie was not a very heinous offence. I know many people who would not think the eating of it too severe an ordeal.

“I’m afraid your dogs regard us with suspicion, Miss Hastings,” said he, still sitting his horse and smiling as though he thoroughly enjoyed the clatter. “Are they very dangerous?”

“Not in the least,” I answered, whipping off the apron and stealthily wiping the flour from my hands as I spoke. And then with sundry fierce flutterings of the aforementioned apron I succeeded in driv-

ing the obstreperous quadrupeds in the direction of the stable.

He then laughingly helped his sister to dismount, and they both followed me on to the verandah where mother and Harold soon joined us. Then tea was ordered in due course, and before we had got half-way through it Will turned up looking as spick and span as though he were going to church. Harold gave me a quiet look, for he had a sly sort of humour, notwithstanding his perennial martyrdom, and I began to grin. The Captain, whose eyes seemed to be ever on me, after watching me for a few moments with a singularly curious look, requested me to explain the cause of my merriment; but as I could not put old Will away by informing them what his occupation had been half an hour before, I excused myself by declaring I didn't know why I was laughing, a confession which threw the party into spontaneous laughter.

“This is what I call jolly,” said the Captain as he drained his fourth cup of

tea. "I have an idea, Mrs. Hastings, that you will be seeing a lot of Maud and me during the next few weeks."

Mother, of course, said she would be delighted to see them whenever they could spare the time to call.

"Thank you," he said, evidently appreciating her courtesy and kindness. "You don't know how pleasant it is to find such friends in our trouble. I am sorry to say that Maud and I are little better than strangers here, but I assure you that we seriously mean to atone for our past sins by a most rigid penance."

"I should think you would find plenty to occupy you now without the penance," suggested Will.

"I'm afraid you're right. And the worst of it all is, I have no head for business. Mackenzie almost plagued me to death yesterday with one confounded thing and the other. A week of it and I shall be a raving madman."

"By George," said Will, "I know plenty of fellows who would like to

risk being driven mad in the same way."

The Captain smiled and appealed to me for support, but as I could not understand a man thinking it too much trouble to look after his own interests, I am afraid my support was of an injurious nature.

"And how do you think the old place looks?" said mother, turning to Maud.
"Had you forgotten it at all?"

"No—that is, I don't think so. You know I spent some very unpleasant years in it, and unpleasant things are the ones which we do not easily forget." She spoke in the same placid, unemotional manner. Whether she described some interesting event, or an event of no interest, her voice underwent no marked inflection. It was slow, measured, and remarkably pure, but as void of all enthusiasm as she appeared to be. Will called it "style." I thought of it not quite so flatteringly.

"Maud finds the old place very lonely,"

said her brother, coming quickly to her rescue, he being not slow to perceive that the effect of her speech upon us was anything but satisfactory. "You see," and here his voice became duly solemn, "one might say that the shadow of our dear father is still in the house. Of course I know that we shall get over it in time, but there is no denying that death is a mysterious and a solemn thing."

With all of which mother entirely agreed, taking it in as some new truth; but she was a good soul, God bless her, and gave everyone credit for being as good as herself.

"You must be very lonely?" she said.

"You are right, Mrs. Hastings," was the quick reply. "Not that the loneliness will particularly affect me, as I shall have so much to do; but poor Maud—I really don't know what's to become of her."

"Oh, I shall go melancholy mad, I suppose," drawled Maud in her sweet voice; "or take to jumping fences and fancying myself a kangaroo."

At this sally we all laughed, sadly I thought, though by the way old Will grinned as he devoured her (metaphorically) he must have regarded it as something excruciatingly clever.

"I hope it won't be as bad as that," said mother with one of her gentle smiles.

"There's no knowing what will happen in a place like this," replied the Captain solemnly. "Now if you would only permit Miss Hastings to come over and stay with us for a couple of weeks you would be doing two benighted Christians a charitable action."

"Do come, dear," pleaded Maud in her placid voice. "I promise you that we shall be as jolly as we can under the circumstances."

"Would you like to go?" said mother, regarding me fondly.

"Oh, yes," I answered, and in fact the invitation offered a change at which one in my aimless condition would be inclined to jump.

"Then that's as good as settled," cried

Captain Fred. “When can you be ready—*to-morrow?*”

I said I thought so, and it was then decided that he should come over in the afternoon and drive me back. Then our little party broke up, though before the Langtons departed the Captain issued a general invitation to the Hastings family—a standing order, he called it, being a military man—which set forth that at any time there was a knife and fork at the table and a horse in the stable for any member of the aforesaid family.

“You, at any rate,” he said, turning to Will, “won’t forget that one of the best jumpers in the country is at your disposal.”

Old Will positively beamed with pleasure. “I’m not likely to forget that,” he said.

“I see you’re a sportsman,” laughed the Captain. “We can depend on you.”

“You mustn’t disappoint us, Mr. Hastings!” It was Maud who spoke, opening wide her languid eyes for the first time and looking right up into his.

"No," he said, "you may depend upon that."

And then they walked away together, and I could see her laughing and looking up into his face, while he, poor old fellow, simply devoured her.

"How good of you to come," said Captain Langton, for he and I walked in the wake of the other two. "You can't imagine the great boon you are about to confer on us."

"Oh," I said, "it is you who are to be thanked for offering me the invitation."

"Then you don't get much change here?" he asked.

"Change!" I exclaimed, laughing at the suggestion, "We have no such word."

"How horrible."

"I suppose it seems so to you who are used to"—I was about to say something which was better left unsaid—"used to the life of big cities," I added. "But to me, who have been accustomed to nothing but the bush, it does not seem so terrible."

"No doubt. I suppose it's all what

one's accustomed to. But have you never thought of the life that is led in big cities, nor wished to share it?"

"I should think that has been the wish of most country people at some time or other ; but we are very stupid here, you know, and often fancy that we are as well off as our brothers of the cities."

"I daresay you are," he replied. "At any rate, to know when you are well off is a happiness given to few. I would to heaven I had been contented to live as my father lived before me. I should have been spared many a sorrow and many a regret."

And this was the man whom rumour had painted in such extraordinary colours ! I felt quite maternal as I said, "I am sorry for you if you have suffered, but don't you think that we bring half our misery on ourselves ?"

"That's it," he said, as though the thought had driven home a newly-discovered truth, "that's just it. But we are blind and stupid and cannot learn."

“Will not, you mean.”

“That’s near it,” he said with a smile.
“I was putting it mildly.”

“You live a lot in town?” said I, beginning in turn to question him, my curiosity running away with my discretion upon the discovery that this terrible Lothario was after all not such a very terrifying person. Indeed, could I have banished the thought that he was the owner of the vast Langton estate, the gay Don Juan of our gossip, I am sure I should have detected no sign or trademark of his supposed calling. To me he seemed to be getting on in years (he could not have been less than three-and-thirty); but that period of man’s life has a unique fascination for girls of my green days. He is yet young enough to love and old enough to have lived; has none of the peevishness of old or middle age, nor none of the insipidity of the callow youth. He is a masterful mystery, and all women love mysteries.

He looked at me before replying, a look

which said as plainly as a look can, “What are you driving at?” He, however, answered carelessly enough, “Yes, a good deal. But, of course, I shall alter all that now. Then I was only the heir.”

“Shall you bring any of your racehorses up for the meet?” I asked next, for our race-meeting was due shortly now, and Will had put me up to getting a good tip if I possibly could.

“I shall win everything worth winning,” he said, “for I mean to bring old Bounder up.”

“What, Bounder who ran second in the last Cup?”

“Yes, confound him! He’ll have to make amends for the trick he played me then.”

“I was sorry to hear that you had lost so much,” said I, growing quite confidential.

“How did you know that?” he asked with an amused smile.

“Oh,” I replied, “we always hear of the doings of great personages.”

"The gossips honour me," he said. "I had no idea my doings interested anyone but myself."

"And the bookmakers," I laughed, for I'm afraid I was not behind the door with my sauce-box.

He too laughed, and I noticed then that the skin about his eyes puckered rather ominously, though the eyes were decidedly handsome, and declared that he had not thought of encountering such cunning in Arcadia; but what else he might have said remains a mystery, for at that moment Will came shouting after us, and on turning round, we discovered that we had, unconsciously, strolled away from the other pair.

"Miss Langton wants to know if you are going to walk home?" bawled Will, who stood some fifty yards away.

"No," shouted the Captain as he waved his hand—a signal of dismissal which Will immediately acted upon, for without another word away he darted on the return journey. "I should like to,

though," continued my companion as he tried hard to look into my face, an attempt which I frustrated by coquettishly turning my head aside, "if you would walk it with me."

"Why, it's over five miles," said I.

"Yes," said he, "I believe it is." And by the tone of his voice I knew he was wondering if I were really a fool.

We slowly retraced our steps to the gate where Will and Maud awaited us, she seated on her horse, he standing by its head. She was evidently not a little annoyed at having been forced to wait, though her young Titan was there to bask in the glory of her countenance, if it so pleased her fulgence to turn on him. She seemed to smile rather amusedly as we strolled up.

"I thought you were lost," she said, "like the Babes in the Wood."

"I am not certain that we should not have been if left to my own resources," replied her brother.

"You couldn't lose Flos anywhere

within fifty miles of Granite Creek," said old Will, blundering like the big idiot that he was.

Brother and sister smiled.

"That's lucky," she said. "I wish you could say the same for me. To-morrow, Flossie, remember. Fred will come over some time in the afternoon. Good-bye, Mr. Hastings. You will come and see us soon, will you not?"

What Will said, I didn't quite catch, but I saw her look into his face with eyes that burnt into his eyes, setting fire to the powder-train of his soul. He took her daintily-gloved fingers in his great brown hand, and I felt that he was holding them rather long, longer, in fact, than common courtesy warrants; for I had an instinctive recollection at the time that the Captain was doing much the same by my own hand, which he further engaged by pressing affectionately. No doubt Will was similarly occupied. There is a wonderful uniformity about human nature, though it is surprising that in this *blasé*

world these finger-pressings, sighs and burning looks never go out of fashion. Perennial, sun-like, they rise and set through time towards eternity, and mark a day. When Eve had eaten of the Tree of Knowledge and saw the first fiery look of wonder in Adam's eyes, she trembled, and her newly-awakened soul leapt up in her eyes, and she *knew*. And ever since then the sons and the daughters of men have likewise looked and known ; and with the new sun the new fire is kindled, and that which was born in Eden no time shall sweep away.

We didn't speak much as we walked back to the house, both being, I take it, just a little preoccupied. A new thing had come suddenly into our lives, without warning, as it were, and we were not yet accustomed to it. At least I was not, and I think that poor old Will was even more agitated than I. There could be no doubt of his admiration for Maud Langton, whereas my feelings, I flatter myself, were not so apparent. It is true I felt

honoured in a sort of way, for how could a poor vain girl help feeling flattered at the attentions of this young Croesus? It is silly, I know, for no man can honour a good woman. Oh, that women would only remember it! Yet there can be no denying that we do make ourselves cheap, more's the pity. And so I felt honoured (poor fool) and not a little terrified, and I began to dream and hope and fear, like the mad thing that I was. Ah, me, it requires an effort to make these confessions. It is like swinging one's heart in the air for every passer-by to laugh at; pricking one's soul with innumerable pin points of conscience. And yet this self-inflicted torture is not without its reward. That the heart is not better for having bled is a false thing, for even with the setting down of these petty follies I seem to purge myself of many a little sin.

Harold was still in his chair as we once more mounted the verandah.

“Where have you been?” he cried.

"I thought you were never coming back."

"Just down to the paddock," said Will, throwing himself in his big cane chair and pulling out his pipe.

"I should have thought you had gone farther," said he, looking meaningly at his brother.

Will was not so dull either as to be unable to see this.

"Should you," he said, with a laugh, "and where should you think I had gone?"

"So far, old fellow, that you'll find it a tough job to get back again."

"That's the worst of you poets," said Will, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, "you have such awful imaginations. By-the-way, Harry, show us the sonnet."

"Sonnet!" exclaimed Harold.

"Yes," said Will, laughingly, "the one you have written to her during our absence."

"Do you mean Miss Langton?"

"Who else could inspire you?"

"Oh," said Harold, quietly, "I could not write a poem to Miss Langton. It would be like pouring cold water down my own back."

"Not a very poetic simile," says Will, rather off-handed.

"Nor a poetic subject."

"A true poet ought to be able to gush about any subject."

"So he can—if he choose. But how did you like the Captain, Will?"

"You'd better ask Flos," said he, thus turning the tables on me: and evidently not wishing to undergo any more of Harold's cross-questioning, he arose from his seat, lit his pipe and marched off.

That was one of Will's good points. He liked us so well that nothing could induce him to quarrel with us. When the storm began rumbling in the distance, and the horizon grew black and threatening, he prepared for the deluge by disappearing beneath his metaphorical umbrella.

"I hope the poor fellow's not smitten," said Harold, after watching his brother's

tall figure disappear round the corner of the house. "He's much too good to be made a fool of."

"Why should he be made a fool?" I asked, as much for my own sake as for his.

"Because he's not for her, nor she for him."

"I'm sure he's good enough for any woman," said I, once more trying to improve my own position.

"But remember who she is and what we are."

"If I thought that would make any difference," I exclaimed, growing mightily flushed, "I would not go near their place to-morrow." And yet I almost repented the words as soon as they were uttered.

"I am not certain that wouldn't be the wiser course to adopt. There, there, don't think I'm always finding fault. Blame rather this unfortunate affliction which forces me to sit and think while the rest of the world is up and doing. Forgive me, dearest, won't you?" The tears

were flashing in his great eyes as he looked up at me, holding out his arms.

“What have I to forgive?” I said. But as I hid my face against his I am not so sure that my tears did not mingle with his too.

CHAPTER IX.

ABOUT three o'clock on the following afternoon Captain Langton drove up to the house in a dashing mail phæton, the like of which had never been seen at Granite Creek. Indeed I doubt if such a turn-out had ever been seen before in that part of the country, for his father was never ostentatious, and there was no one else who could have afforded such a luxury. I could not help thinking of Mr. Wallace and his new wagonette, and how envious he would be when he saw this magnificent affair with its pair of high steppers, and its groom in the back seat with his folded arms.

"By George," said Will, for the whole family had come out on the verandah to see the show, "the Captain does it in

style, and no mistake. What a grand pair, by George ! Did you ever see such action, Flos ? And look at that servant ! Well, this is something like, you know ! ”
—etc.

At that moment the carriage entered the gateway and the Captain dashed round the semicircular path which led to the door, and pulled up before us with a suddenness which brought the horses back with a tremendous clatter. Then the servant, who all this time had sat as impressive and impenetrable-looking as the Sphinx, suddenly jumped from his seat with an alacrity most astonishing and darted to the horses' heads.

Captain Langton then alighted and came towards us, the same affable smile on his good-looking face.

“ Is our passenger ready ? ” he asked, after formally shaking hands with all the members of the family.

“ Quite,” said Will, “ though I’m afraid her box won’t add to the dignity of your turn out.”

The Captain thought this an excellent jest, though I failed to see it in the same light, for my box was an old cumbersome wooden one which mother had brought out with her from England twenty-five years before. Will, however, lumped it out on his back with as much pride as though he were carrying the crown jewels of his late serene Majesty, the Great Mogul, though I thought I saw the nose of the sphinx-like groom elevate itself the eighth part of an inch, as his eyes encountered the ancient structure. Servants have an unspeakable horror of poverty. They despise the "honest poor" more cordially than did ever a Roman his slaves, and, unless their master's purse be full, feel even for him a contempt which borders on the despicable. I didn't at all mind the master seeing my shabby trunk, but the servant made me feel uneasy.

At last, after having kissed and said good-bye to my dear ones, I mounted the phaeton, Captain Langton first helping me to do so, then springing to my side

the moment after; the groom stepped back from the horses' heads, the Captain shook the reins and away we started at a rare pace. For the first few moments all was excitement, and then, strangely enough, I thought of the servant, whom I felt sure we had left behind in our hurried departure. On turning round, however, I beheld that worthy individual seated in the same grim fashion, looking for all the world as though he had never left the seat.

But in the meantime Captain Langton was regulating the pace of his team, a task which required no little patience as well as tact, for the horses were in tremendous fettle and carried on like a couple of kittens. By degrees, however, he broke them into a steady trot, and while we bowled along through the fresh, sweet-smelling air, I all aglow with excitement and the novelty of the situation, he talked to me of many things of no particular interest, though I recollect thinking that the tones of his voice would

make any subject interesting. And when he looked into my face in his strange, half-melancholy way, and told me that the drive had brightened my eyes, and added a wonderful bloom to my cheeks, there was so much respectful adoration in his gaze that my foolish heart began to beat wildly, and my pulses to throb as though some new electric fluid had entered into my blood.

At last we passed through the big white gates which gave access to the broad drive which led by a circuitous route to the big house, before the door of which we eventually pulled up. In a moment the servant was in his old position at the horses' heads ; then I was helped down by my companion, who led me up on to the verandah where stood his sister Maud, a rather melancholy figure in her deep black dress.

“ Welcome to Langton,” said he, as my feet touched the topmost step of the verandah.

“ Welcome,” repeated his sister, coming

forward and kissing me. "You don't know how glad I am to see you, dear," she went on affectionately, slipping her arm about my waist and leading me into the house. "I do hope you won't find the old place very dull."

"I am sure I shall not," was my reply, "for a place would have to be very dull indeed to seem so to me."

"It's very gratifying to hear you say so, dear. Of course we shall be buried alive, but as the tomb is a commodious one we shall have plenty of time to explore it. We can ride, you know," she went on, as though it were necessary that she should make apologies to me, "and indulge in sundry other little innocent amusements, but father's death will prevent us keeping anything like open house."

And yet there was always somebody in the house, either a squatter friend or a boon companion from Melbourne, and I don't think we three, that is, Maud, her brother and I, had more than a dozen

meals by ourselves during the whole period of my visit. Certainly, it was the most singular house of mourning I ever entered, and though everybody declared, as in duty bound, that the shade of the deceased still hovered in the air, it being imperceptible troubled us but little.

Langton Station was generally accounted one of the finest properties in the Wimmera District, and it was currently reported that the late Mr. Langton had left over a million in hard cash. But be that as it may, the run was known to be a highly prosperous one, and no one dreamt of doubting the truth of the statement. It (the run) stretched for miles and miles through the best grassed, best watered parts of the district, and afforded excellent pasturage for the countless flocks and herds which rambled over its vast surface ; and I have often heard father say that the Langton wool was always the best in the market, so that the owner's income, in good seasons, must

have been an extremely handsome one, even in these days of gigantic fortunes.

The house itself was not one suitable to the estate on which it was built, being a long, low rambling place, half wood, half granite, though it was so embowered with creepers of every description that it would require a more than superficial glance to discover where the one ended or the other began. A broad verandah, screened with roses, grape-vines, and the beautiful Virginia creeper, traversed three sides of the house, and here we always had tea of an afternoon, or dinner if it were too hot to stay in doors. Let the sun be never so warm, behind this thick screen of leaves the atmosphere was invariably delightful, and Maud and I used to lounge about on the easy chairs in very thin attire, drinking cool drinks or pecking at grapes and peaches. It was all a new delightful life to me. At first it seemed a little strange to be surrounded with every luxury, to have nothing to do but lie in the shade, eat peaches and read novels; to ring a

bell when one wanted one's shoes, and not even have to brush the dust from one's own habit.

But I think there is no creature on earth so quickly adapts itself to circumstances as a woman. In three days I was as much at home as though I had been born to the life ; in a week I had caught Maud's languid tones. For this, however, I was duly thankful, for she spoke beautifully, with a voice as soft as some dream-melody. When I got to know her better I didn't wonder at poor old Will's blind tumble into the intricate meshes of love's net. Had I been a man I believe I would have loved her for her voice alone. In this, I am well aware that I, indirectly, pay myself an extravagant compliment, but my candour compels me to admit, though it puts my modesty to the blush, that I have been told by persons of the sterner sex much of this which I have written concerning Maud. Oh, vanity of vanities ! I may well laugh at these things now, for my eyes are open and I see ; but in our

young days, in the spring of life when all the trees are covered with their fresh green leaves, and new emotions sprout continually in the garden of our breast, we gather all these sweet things in our arms, nor stay to think that the weeds and flowers grow side by side. In those days no grim phantasies baulk the way to enjoyment. All is real and all is marvellous. Were it not for the price we pay for ignorance, what happy days we might call them.

And here another thought intrudes itself. As the little gods of our own small worlds, why should we not, like the greater gods, expect some sign of adoration, or, like the one Great God, demand it? For if it is pleasing to us, is it not also pleasing to Him, of whom we are the visible form, the divinity made manifest? I take it there is something more than mere vulgar conceit in our love of what we call admiration. Our blood tingles, our eyes flash like heaven's own stars, and we tread with feet of air over the roughest road;

but it ennobles us at the same time according to our natures, and if it fill the soul of one with petty pride, even that raises him into regions he had never hitherto trod, and makes of him, too, a symbol of divinity. "We touch heaven when we lay our hands on a human body." Perhaps the thought is not all a dream.

The days sped pleasantly enough at Langton, despite the fact that it was a house of mourning. After breakfast we usually went for our ride, the Captain invariably accompanying us ; in the afternoon we drove, if we felt so inclined and the day was not too oppressive : otherwise we lounged about in our sweet do-nothing way. Maud improved greatly on acquaintance, though she still retained a certain coldness, as part of her nature, which was not at all times agreeable. Still, if you could remember that she meant nothing by it, and take her indifferent qualities along with her good ones, you would find her strike a very even balance.

She was consistently charming, always affable, though to me it seemed a conscious affability ; yet I doubt if she had ever before exerted herself to please anyone to the same extent. And yet, in spite of all her coldness and seeming indifference, I knew she was a vain woman and as fond of admiration as any of us poor creatures ; and I often thought she merely suffered old Will to wait on her simply to please her vanity. She had been much spoilt, that I could see, and looked upon the adoration of men as her unassailable right. I am afraid, however, that I never properly appreciated Will's servile submission. Another man, another thousand men, might have bowed the knee to her in grovelling adoration without my thinking the proceeding in any way derogatory to their natures ; but when it came to my own brother it altered the complexion of things. She must indeed be an excellent woman who can pass the critical examination of an embryo sister-in-law.

Captain Langton, on the other hand,

had none of his sister's hauteur or coldness, but was unaffectedly genuine, making one believe that he thought little of his vast wealth and enviable position. Always considerate and courteous, and exceptionally so to me, he seemed to belong to a world of which I was entirely ignorant. I had read of men studying to please, living, as it were, only for the sake of obeying a woman's behests ; but hitherto my experience had led me into that groove where men and women are alike expected to look after themselves. My every suggestion was obeyed with an alacrity which was quite embarrassing ; no wish nor whim of mine was left ungratified, if it were possible to gratify it. Nor would he listen to any remonstrance on my part.

" You are here," he said one day, when I complained of his zeal in attending to my petty wants, " and while you are here you must really permit me and mine to devote ourselves to making your stay a happy one."

"But I am really not accustomed to all this luxury and consideration," I answered. "It will entirely spoil me for the old life at Granite Creek."

"I scarcely think so," he replied, looking hard at me as he spoke, "and if it should, what would it matter? You are not likely to spend your life in this out-of-the-way spot."

"Who can say? And, after all, Wallan is not such a bad place."

"I suppose not," he laughed; "but it is scarcely good enough for you."

I know the blood rushed to my face and the fire to my eyes, but concealing, poorly I must confess, the effect of his words upon me, I said that Granite Creek had always been my home, and that to me it was the one dear spot in the universe.

"You have been happy there?" said he.

"Very happy."

"Lucky indeed," he said, as though speaking to himself. "I, you see, have never known what it was to enjoy the blessings of home. My father, good man

though he was, was narrow of soul and could not understand the spirit which was not cast in his own mould. My mother I scarcely remember. But I think that I too might have been different had she been spared to me."

" You have suffered, then ? " said I, for there was so deep a tone of melancholy in his voice that my heart rushed out to him.

He laughed gaily, or rather made a sad attempt at gaiety. " Of course I've suffered. Who hasn't ? It is man's heritage. A sad one, isn't it ? But you were speaking of Granite Creek," said he, suddenly reverting to the former subject, as though he wished to avoid speaking of his own sorrows. " Do you really think you could be happy in such a place for ever and ever ? Have you no wish to see the world ? Have you never dreamt of the wonders that lie out yonder waiting for you to explore ? " And he waved his hand as though embracing the earth and heaven with his thoughts.

" Oh, yes," was my reply, " for who is

there that is young who would not like to travel ? Harold and I have many a long talk about the wonderful cities of Europe ; and he used to say that he would take me to see them when he became famous. Poor Harold ! ”

“ Ah, then, I was not altogether wrong in my surmises. Granite Creek, I have no doubt, is a very beautiful place—a sort of fairy oasis in this bush desert—but it seems that we dream even there.”

“ Why should we not ? ”

“ Why not indeed ? The mortal would like to be an angel, and, if we could only know the truth, I daresay we should find the angel sighing to be a mortal. We can’t command our dreams, you know, though I see no reason why such modest ones as yours should not be fulfilled.”

“ They may be yet,” said I half-saucily.

“ A beautiful woman,” he replied, “ need never dream idle dreams.” And though I knew not exactly what he meant, I felt he wished me to understand that he considered me beautiful ; and

consequently many foolish emotions ran riot in my breast. What did I not dream as I lay there looking up into his handsome face and listening to his low serious voice? a voice which at times rang almost as sweet as Maud's. There was something wonderfully fascinating in it all to a girl who had only been accustomed to the very small mercies of the world; for I hold that however sincere the affection may be in itself, the more material side of this fleshly spirit manifests itself in all we think or feel. How many girls are there, I wonder, who would not have thought as I thought, felt as I felt?

"Do you know," said he, looking down into my eyes, "that I am thinking of going to England next year?"

"I did not know," I answered, trying to look away from him and feeling as though a dark cloud had shot suddenly across the sun of my universe.

"Yes," he continued, watching me all the time with a voracious look, "I have long had a wish to see the Old Country,

in fact, all the old great countries of Europe, and I think it's about time I gratified it."

" You will have a pleasant trip," said I, knowing not what else to say. " Shall you take Maud ?"

" I think not ; and as for the pleasant trip, that will depend entirely upon who accompanies me."

But just here, as the conversation was taking a tender and confidential tone, and I was already beholding myself careering through the famous cities of Europe with a certain person by my side, our *tête-a-tête* was broken in upon by Maud, who, however, no sooner saw the significant position of our chairs than she stood still looking inexpressibly stupid, hesitating whether it would not be more politic to beat a hasty retreat.

" Excuse me, dear," she said, and she looked singularly knowing as she spoke, " but I really didn't know."

" Know ! " I echoed, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable.

"There is a visitor for you."

"A visitor," I cried, "I wonder who it can be?" But at that moment, catching sight of Ella, I bounded from my chair, leaving the Captain disconsolate, and sprang into my friend's arms. It was the first time I had seen her since coming to Langton, and we had so much to say to each other that I hastily carried her off to my room under the pretence of relieving her of her cloak and hat.

"You have altered," she said, holding me in her arms and kissing me as though I had committed some fearful crime.

"Altered," I echoed with an affected look of indifference. "How could I alter in two weeks?"

"You have, all the same," she replied in her quiet way, which always reminded me so forcibly of Arthur. "You are not the girl you were at Granite Creek."

I laughed at her, and kissed her, and called her a foolish old thing, but I knew all the time that she was speaking the truth. In the light of the new day, the

past seemed like a confused, partly-remembered dream. I had drunk from the cup of luxury and had given my soul up to foolish dreams. I had looked above my sun into the blue beyond, and the mystic light there dazzled me. I could not see. I was like one wrestling with an invisible assailant. Yet into my spirit was blown the breath of a new life, and through my veins the blood coursed like living drops of fire.

CHAPTER X.

EARLY the next morning Will rode over to breakfast, looking as spick and span as you please, for he, like myself, had been quick to take a hint, and, outwardly at least, he had already begun to imitate Captain Langton. He knew, poor fellow, that women are captivated more by glitter than quality, and I shrewdly suspect it was with the hope of appearing to advantage before a certain young lady that he had donned his best manners with his new riding-suit. He certainly looked capable of captivating any woman's heart, and I marked with pleasure, for I had grown mightily fastidious of late, that when he spoke he pitched his voice in a minor key and avoided using slang to any great extent—to entirely avoid it would

be a sheer impossibility. Altogether I was not displeased with the progress he was making, and if I feared for the result of his mad infatuation—as mad it most certainly was—I yet had sufficient belief in him to trust his strength of character to see him through the trouble. That Maud had any love for him, that is, such love only as would satisfy his ardent longing, I doubted, if not entirely disbelieved. I did not think he was the sort of man for her, for such women do not value such hollow victories. It is no pleasure to them to possess a slave; they require a master. I think she liked him well—well enough to keep him revolving round in her train of satellites—but that she entertained for him an affection of a serious nature I could not credit. But he, poor old fellow, unconscious of aught but that she was the most dainty and entrancing creature he had ever seen, worshipped before her shrine with blinded eyes, and a heart so full of conflicting emotions that it drove

every other serious reflection from his head.

It had previously been arranged that we should picnic that day at a place called Fern Tree Gully, an enchanting spot some ten miles from the station, and chiefly on this account Will had ridden over as already stated. He, the Captain, Maud, and I were to compose the party, so immediately after breakfast we set about preparing for the outing. First of all we saw to the hamper, that most necessary piece of baggage, and then dispatched the sphinx-like groom on the journey in a buggy. He was to drive to a certain ruined hut on the borders of the Gully and there prepare for our arrival.

And here I may as well confess that my horror of that apparently taciturn personage had gradually yielded to a no more offensive sentiment than that of curiosity. At first he used to look at me in a hard, quizzing sort of way, which I at the time deemed impertinent, though I pretended not to notice it; yet when I

once happened to look closely into the man's face I was surprised to see an unmistakable look of pity in his eyes. This, you may be sure, astonished me considerably, and my curiosity getting the better of my dignity, I waylaid him one afternoon in the garden and entered into conversation with him, thereby hoping to discover what sort of fearful wild-fowl he might be. But in him I was greatly disappointed, for I found him a quite intelligent personage, though profoundly depressed. He, however, seemed to appreciate the honour I conferred upon him, for he must have exclaimed, "Thank you, miss," at least a score of times during our short conversation. I also discovered that originally he must have been intended for a jovial fellow, for he had a pair of the merriest little twinkling lights of eyes that I have ever seen, and though his face was decidedly ugly and as hard as a piece of leather, his nose slightly elevated out of the strict line of beauty,

there was a curve about the corners of his ugly mouth which, I felt sure, concealed a world of sly humour. What brought him to his present doleful state I had yet to learn, but I felt convinced that Bobbie (for Bobbie Flaskett was the gentleman's name) had some mighty sorrow gnawing incessantly at his vitals.

At last we four got under weigh, all mounted on the best blood in that part of the country, and as we raced break-neck over the long stretches of grass, laughing and screaming to each other like so many children let loose from school, I could not help thinking that there was no happier girl in the whole world than I, or a more glorious or exhilarating feeling than that of being borne in a mad gallop through the fresh air and the bright sunshine.

“To the Withered Wattle,” roared Will, as he pointed to a big dead tree which stood on a small eminence nearly two miles ahead of us, and sitting down on his great hunter he showed us the

way over the first fence of post and rails.

Thud, thud, thud ! We were beside him in a moment, and with faces set we raced neck and neck like four demons. Now it was a gully we dived into, now a small creek we took with a flying leap ; now a fallen tree, and now another great fence of post and rails. No matter what the obstacle might be, we raced at it with the reckless impetuosity of idiots, and cleared it too as a kangaroo would a water-hole. Oh, it was a mad gallop ! I felt every nerve of me on fire ; my brain was in a whirl, my eyes danced in my head like a couple of mad things. My hands involuntarily tightened on the rein ; I cut my mare across the shoulders, a swinging slash. And then I felt her gather herself up as though she would jump out of her skin, and away she tore like a storm-cloud through the sky. I shot by Will, whose weight was beginning to tell on his mount, with a triumphant wave of my whip ; drew up to Maud's

crupper, then to her girth, and after a short sharp struggle left her behind as well. But almost at the same moment I heard the beat of hoofs on my right, and on glancing round discovered Captain Langton rapidly overhauling me. He was evidently very much in earnest, and was making his horse go for all it was worth. He smiled defiantly as his eyes met mine. "I'll beat you," he shouted, and pointed to the goal, now half a mile away. I nodded acceptance of the challenge and away we went neck and neck.

He was mounted on a superb animal, one that had pulled off more than one steeplechase in and about Melbourne, but I also was mounted on one of the best cross-country horses in the Langton stables, and moreover, I had a decided advantage as regards weight. So away we went, leaving the others farther and farther behind with every stride. Occasionally I stole a glance at him. He was riding for dear life, a look of fierce

determination on his face ; an aggravated look, as though he did not relish the thought of a girl giving him so much trouble. That he meant to win, if it were in man and horse to do it, was unmistakable. And so I, too, entered into the spirit of the conflict, and determined to beat him at all hazards, for it seemed to me the race I rode was something more than a mere horse-race—a symbol of that race which ends only with life. I put my teeth together and took a firmer grip of the reins. The mare answered to the pressure nobly, and in a moment I was quite half a length ahead. I turned to him with a smile of triumph—I couldn't help it—and our eyes met. He looked downright cross, but I was too set upon beating him to do anything but smile at his anger. He spurred his horse viciously forward till he had recovered the lost ground, then sullenly pointed ahead to the fence we should have to clear before we had the straight run home. I smiled in acknow-

ledgment of his salute and eased my mare a little.

The fence referred to could not, I should think, have been less than five feet, though most probably an inch or two higher, and was built of such heavy timber that it presented a really formidable obstacle. However, we had neither the time nor inclination to hang back now. In a minute we were upon it, and like two birds we rose at the self-same moment. My mare's hind legs rapped it loudly, but she fell on her feet all right, and as he, too, had cleared it without mishap there was only left the stretch of a few hundred yards to the withered tree. I saw him bend forward and urge his great horse on with whip and spur, and the fury of the race entered my blood. I pressed my lips firmly, muttering, "I will beat him, I will, I will," and I'm afraid that I, too, whipped my beautiful mare somewhat severely. But at such moments one does not stay to think humanely. I only know

the mare threw up her head, pulling me forward on her mane, and like an arrow shot above the green grass. For a few strides he kept pace with me, then gradually dropped behind. The up-hill part of the journey was too much for him. I sailed under the great withered arms of the wattle, half-a-dozen lengths ahead.

As I eased the mare he rode up to me.

“ You were one too many for me this time,” he said, “ but I’ll have my revenge, never fear.”

“ You’ll have to train a little first,” said I, smiling all over, for I was flushed with my victory and vastly delighted in having thus beaten him.

Then up came Will and Maud, the former’s mount looking as though he had had enough of the giant for one day.

“ A grand race, by George ! ” said Will. “ I’d give anything to be about three stone lighter, so that I could keep pace with you.”

"It would take the old gentleman himself to keep pace with your sister," said the Captain somewhat irritably in spite of his smile.

"She always was a terror over the sticks," Will answered. "I remember when she was a bit of a kid—" and here he was launching off into one of his numerous reminiscences anent my wondrous childhood—for he was always devotedly attached to me, dear old fellow, and never imagined it possible that I could be anything but a source of interest to everyone—when I pulled him up sharply.

"Don't be silly, Will. I could not have won the race without the horse."

"The horse is a clinker," he replied, "but so is the rider." That was the worst of Will. He would have his say if he died for it.

"I think you are right, Will," said Captain Langton as he helped me to dismount, for here we gave the horses a rest, he and Will rubbing them down with dry

grass. "Horse and rider are so thoroughly in harmony with each other that it would be a great pity if we ever separated them. Do you think I could prevail upon you to let Miss Hastings accept the mare? She beat me fairly and deserves the prize."

Will first looked at me, then at the mare, and then at him. "It's deuced kind of you," he said, "a splendid gift, by George. I'm sure it would delight her immensely. But the old man, you know —he's rather queer about that sort of thing."

And so the dear old fellow blundered and stuttered like a great booby; but the Captain only laughed and declared it would be a thousand pities if the mare and I ever parted company, and that he would see to it that we did not. As for me, I felt exceedingly uncomfortable, more especially as I thought Maud was laughing noiselessly at me all the time. Her brother's open admiration was scarcely to her liking, I think; but for that reason I need not have judged her

harshly, considering how I had thought of her and Will.

After a rest of some fifteen minutes we all mounted once more and continued our journey, this time like peaceable Christians. Yet it was a grand jaunt, when one comes to think of it, and one which, I am sure, each member of that little party will recollect to his dying day. I can shut my eyes and hear the clatter of the hoofs again, and feel the wind beating upon my face and tugging at my hair as though it wished to drag it from my head. Now we are sweeping along with a grand, far-stretching stride, now skimming a creek, and now rising to the grim unbending rails. And then a thud as we land on the other side, and then away again as though Satan were at our heels. And how angry Captain Langton looked when it was all over ; and how red Will got with the exertion, and Maud—I don't think she altogether relished my victory, for if there was one thing upon which she prided herself it was her horse-

manship. Languid and lazy as she was under ordinary circumstances, she became a changed woman when seated on the back of a horse. Then all the ice of her nature grew warm with the blood of life ; her eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed. At such moments I thought her the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I couldn't be surprised at poor old Will's infatuation, for after all he was only a man, with all a man's faults and virtues, and he hoped to win for himself this star of the feminine firmament.

She, however, was extremely affable to him to-day, and though I rode with Captain Langton I did not forget to cast an eye on them occasionally, as a sister should ; for I hold it to be the duty of a sister to look well after the brother lest some designing minx step in and lure him from the path you would have him tread. Will was radiant, all smiles and pretty speeches, his blue eyes glistening in the sunlight like two great precious stones—precious stones indeed ! And she like-

wise appeared to be in a most amiable mood, and I began to wonder if she really were getting to care for the genial giant by her side. As for me, I was as happy as a girl could be under such circumstances, and kept up a constant stream of chatter with my companion, who quickly forgot all about his defeat, till we arrived at our destination. Here we were met by Flaskett the groom, to whom we handed our horses, and then, after we had indulged in a little light refreshment, we commenced our ascent of the Gully.

Between two bright green hills the track ran up a gentle slope for a hundred yards or so, which distance being satisfactorily accomplished, we entered a veritable fairy bower of greenery, the beautiful yellow and green fronds stretching above our heads like shimmering waves of sunlight. On every hand the vegetation was so dense that it was impossible to see more than a dozen yards to right or left, though here and there the bright sun above forced its beams into solemn-

looking crevices, lighting them up with a radiance both rare and mysterious. No sound broke the stillness of the scene, save for the gentle ripple of the little stream at our feet, the musical mother of the great tree ferns whose roots, laved with her sparkling kisses, sucked in the nourishment which was their life.

“By George,” gasped old Will, lost in admiration at the grandeur surrounding him, “what a place! Wouldn’t poor little Harry like to be here?”

“He is a poet, is he not?” asked Maud, though she knew well enough, I having told her as much at least a score of times.

“Rather,” was the reply, and there was no mistake about the exclamation either. “He’s going to be the first great Australian poet, poor little chap.”

“He hopes to be,” said I, seeing her smile quietly at his enthusiasm, and being ready to take up arms on the slightest provocation.

“Does he write poetry?” she asked.

"Of course," said I indignantly. "How could he be a poet if he didn't?"

"Oh!" she answered.

"And good poetry too," said I, seeing that her exclamation implied that all poets do not necessarily write poetry, though they dabble in verse—a fine hairsplitting distinction with which I had no patience.

"He has been here, I suppose?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, once—when he was a little thing. Father carried him."

"Poor little chap," said he quite sympathetically, "he must come here again."

"Ah, I'm afraid he cannot come now. He's ever so much heavier."

"What of that, poor little chap. I'll have a chair rigged up for him and get a couple of my men to carry it. We won't spoil the making of our first great poet for the sake of a little trouble."

"You are very good, Captain Langton. If we only could manage to bring him

with us I know it would be giving him one of the greatest pleasures of his life."

"Would it not please you too?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ah, wouldn't it! He has been our baby, you know, and we all do what we can to make him happy."

Then upward we toiled once more, and as he held my hand, for more reasons, I am afraid, than helping me across the little stream or pulling me up the steep places, he talked much of Harold and his prospects as a writer, wanted to know all about what the boy had already done and when he was going to publish, and let me know that he was intimately acquainted with many literary men in Melbourne whose good opinion might be worth much to a beginner. To all of this I listened with a beating and a thankful heart, and if I let my hand rest longer in his than was absolutely necessary, or if my tongue formed warmer words than, under ordinary circumstances, it would have done, it was for the sake of the poor

dreamer who had set his soul upon clutching the gossamer wings of the fame-bird.

At last Maud came to a standstill and declared that she would go no further; her boots were wet and her skirt covered with mud (as indeed were mine, only I had never thought of them); she failed to see where the pleasure of such toil came in, and thought it a piece of arrant nonsense for four apparently sane people to inflict such torture on themselves in the absurd belief that it was pleasure. She had had quite enough of Fern Tree Gully. It was her first visit there, and she would take good care it should be her last. I was not in the least surprised at this sudden outbreak of hers; indeed my only surprise was that she had ever consented to undertake the journey.

"Only a little further, Maud," said her brother, "and we shall be at the top. Don't spoil our enjoyment by your obstinacy, please."

"I don't want to spoil your enjoyment," she answered quietly.

"Then why will you always insist upon playing the part of the wet blanket?"

"I was not aware that I had any decided partiality for that *rôle*," she answered with a smile. "But as the wet blanket is such a disagreeable companion, why not go on and leave her here?"

"Shall we, Miss Hastings?" he asked.

"I can't leave Maud," I replied.

"Pray don't consider me," exclaimed that young lady as she took her seat on the trunk of a big fern which had fallen across the track.

But here I came and sat beside her, an act which caused our two companions to look at each other and then laugh loudly.

"You're not tired, Flos?" said Will.
"No gammon, now."

"Tired or not," said I somewhat indignantly, for in those days I used to look upon my robust health with something like reproach, "I stay with Maud."

"She means it, old man," said he,

turning to Captain Fred, whose eyes were on me all this time.

"I'm afraid she does, Will," was the reply ; "though it's a pity that we should miss the view from the top of the hill. If I could only prevail upon her to take my arm, and you could prevail upon Maud to take yours, I think we should accomplish the journey satisfactorily. What do you say, ladies ?"

The ladies were mute for a moment or two ; then they looked at each other and smiled, and eventually the quartette set out in pairs.

The top of the gully was, in spite of Maud's sighings and moanings, reached in due course, and the view therefrom duly admired, though advancing into the glaring sunlight after the cool retreat of the fern-bower was so dazzling as to produce a strange and none too agreeable sensation.

The two gentlemen smoked a cigar apiece as we sat talking and watching the sun-shadows in the valleys below, and

then the Captain, taking out his watch, declared that it was time we returned to luncheon ; so, amid more exclamations of annoyance from Maud, we arose and began our descent of the slippery track.

It had seemed to us a singularly hard road to mount, but it was a decidedly awkward one to descend, and had it not been for my cavalier, whose strong hand steadied me when I slipped, I should have been down at least a dozen times. As it was I did strain my ankle a little, which caused me such pain that I was forced to sit and rest it for a couple of minutes ; and I must say that it was almost worth the pain to behold the extreme solicitude of my companion. He was a blockhead and a careless fool ; he ought to be jolly well kicked ; he would rather have broken his own neck, confound him ! than that I should suffer the slightest pain. To all of which I, of course, declared that it was none of his fault ; that it was a mere nothing, and

that there was no one to blame but myself.

Upon our setting out once more, though this time he would insist upon my taking his arm, declaring the accident would never have happened had I done so before, I was made aware of the fact that we were now entirely alone. Will and Maud, who had been in front of us all the way, not detecting our stoppage, had gone on. That I felt rather nervous at this discovery, and not a little embarrassed, I freely confess, and I began to wonder curiously if he would take advantage of the opportunity thus offered him, and likewise how I should behave when it came to the point. I was half afraid of him yet, though I had seen nothing in him to warrant the rumours which had been set afloat concerning his erratic past. Still, he was not altogether free from suspicion, though, I may add, none the less interesting on that account. If there is one thing we women despise it is a noodle, though, on the other hand, a

man has not merely to be a scapegrace to command our admiration, though I grant you that the stories of his wild doings are never displeasing. I think I should have been less suspicious of Captain Fred had he shown a little more of the scamp, that is, in an inoffensive sort of way. One might have summed him up then with some accuracy; but his present exemplary conduct rendered him a tantalizing enigma.

So down we went deeper and deeper into the mystic gloom of the fern bower, the light now being almost entirely shut out by the intertwining branches above us, and now again radiant as though filtered through leaves of gold. But at length, in one of the dark places above mentioned, I was unfortunate enough to slip again, this time over a root which crossed the path. I'm afraid I gave a little scream, and that in consequence I considerably startled my companion, for he drew me suddenly to him and inquired the cause of my cry.

"I have gone over on my ankle again," I said.

"The same one?"

"Yes."

"It has hurt you, dear?"

"A little, I think."

"What a confounded ass I am," he exclaimed, "I ought to be jolly well horsewhipped." Then very earnestly, "Can you walk all right?"

"Oh, yes. At least I think so." And I set out once more boldly enough, but was quickly reduced to an ignoble limp.

"Why, you're fainting," he said suddenly, seeing the ashy look on my face, for at that moment I really thought I should faint, so acute was the pain in my ankle. Then he plunged his handkerchief into the stream which ran at our feet, and with it bathed my temples till I felt the deadly sickness pass away.

"Thank you," I said, "I feel better now. How silly of me to be sure; but, do you know, all the strength went out of me for the moment. I am a nice one

to bring for a picnic, am I not ? ” and I tried to laugh at my misfortunes.

“ By Jove, you’ve got some pluck,” he answered admiringly. “ I know what it is to sprain an ankle. But now what about our next move ? Do you think you can walk at all ? ”

“ I shall have to,” said I, making a feeble effort to rise to my feet. “ We cannot be very far from the hut now.”

“ Not far, I think, and yet too far for you to walk in your present condition.”

“ How shall I get there, then ? ”

“ You must be carried.”

“ Carried ! You could not get the mare up here.”

“ I shall not attempt it.”

“ You will go for Will ? Yes, that is a good idea. I shall be all right here till you return.”

“ I shall not go for Will either, for you might faint during my absence. I have caused you mischief enough already ; let me now earn my forgiveness.”

I’m afraid I understood him well

enough. At any rate my heart began to beat as though it did, sending the tell-tale blood back into my face. Yet, woman-like, I had to assume an ignorance of his meaning by asking him what he meant.

"You can't walk," he replied ; "I can't leave you here, so you must allow me to carry you."

Of course I objected. I couldn't think of such a thing. He really must run for Will. I was very sorry to cause him so much trouble, it was just as annoying to me as it must be to him, but if he wouldn't mind bringing my brother I should be ever so much obliged to him. And so on, and so on ; and all the time I was quivering with excitement—an excitement which quite banished my physical pain—and wondering what it would be like to feel myself in those strong arms. To all my objections, however, he returned some plausible argument, and as I felt that only by letting him have his way could we reach

our destination, the upshot of it all was that he lifted me in his arms as though I were a baby, notwithstanding my substantial weight, and bore me along in the cool shade of the green and golden ferns.

CHAPTER XI.

At last we emerged into the open, when to my inexpressible relief, for however pleasant the situation might have been it was nevertheless a delicate one, I beheld Will running towards us.

“What’s up?” he panted, as he came tearing along. He was quite fifty yards when he shouted, so that by the time he reached us the Captain had, in answer to my eager request, somewhat grudgingly deposited me on the grass.

“Flossie has sprained her ankle, and I have had to carry her. I’m glad you’ve come, old man; you can lend me a hand.”

I could not help admiring his coolness. Glad Will had come, indeed, and only a couple of minutes before he told me he

would the distance were ten times as great. But, of course, I wasn't going to say anything, and I'm sure old Will never suspected that, for the Captain, his arrival was decidedly inopportune.

"Are you in very great pain?" asked the dear old fellow—after he had been given a hasty account of the accident—his face betraying the utmost concern.

"Can't you see she is?" said Captain Langton, somewhat irritably. "Look at her poor face."

"No, no; not in the least," I answered hastily. "It smarts a little, that is all."

"Poor old Flos," said Will. "We must get you round to the hut, and treat you to a cold water bandage. By George, your ankle's swollen like a pudding." And with that he took me up in his big arms and hurried away with me, Captain Langton following with a none too agreeable look on his face.

Upon arriving at the hut, which had once been the abode of a solitary

shepherd, but which now had fallen into disuse and disrepair, a little stimulant was given me, a cold bandage applied to the swollen limb, and in a few minutes, save for the dull, throbbing pain, I felt another being. Maud was greatly distressed at the accident, and extremely solicitous for my welfare, so much so, in fact, that I immediately began to upbraid myself for ever thinking that she was more selfish than I, or nine-tenths of her fellows. I think, when all's said, that human nature is much the same in all of us. As we cry or laugh in unison, so do we think and feel. The common aim of all is the same—happiness; the common end the grave.

Presently Will entered the hut and bore me out on the grass, where, beneath the shade of a big tree, rugs and cushions had been piled up to make a comfortable couch. Here, also, the servant had spread a snow-white table-cloth, which was laden with countless

delicacies ; and though at times a grasshopper did lurch into a jam tart, and the flies buzzed around us like a swarm of winged demons, we yet contrived, amid jest and laughter, to demolish a substantial meal. Had it not been for my unfortunate accident, I think I should have been supremely happy, for not alone was everybody in the highest spirits, which must have proved contagious, but I had experienced that day a new and wonderful sensation, which, though I knew not yet whether it was the harbinger of life or death, had filled me with a great joy. Life, it seemed, truly, and bright as though born in the sun-kingdoms. Yet there was a terror in it too, a sort of dark cloud which might bring the night and the rain, or which might but conceal the effulgence of some new sun. Captain Langton, as I have said before, had always been to me a source of extreme curiosity. The stories which wove their interest round his erring personality were legion, and if half of

them were true he must have been almost past praying for. I used to wonder what he was like, and why he didn't marry, and—and many other foolish things; for, being gifted with a most surprising imagination, I not unusually constructed my air castles in the most fantastic styles of architecture. Strange castles they were, too, with fairy towers and grim dungeons, in the former or the latter of which I spent my idle days.

After luncheon Captain Langton brought out his cigar case, and he and Will began blowing great wreaths of smoke from their mouths, the man Flaskett, even, participating in the enjoyment of the fragrant weed, for to him his master had flung a cigar, telling him to be off and smoke it.

"He seems a rum sort of fellow," said Will, as the man picked the cigar up, mumbled out some thanks, and rolled off.
"Looks a regular convict."

I couldn't help smiling in spite of my physical pain—the allusion was such a

very unfortunate one. But that was just like old Will. He would blunder over a clump of thistles with his bare feet and discover after, by the pain he suffered, that he had been doing that which he should not have done. I saw a quick look pass between Maud and her brother ; it was just a flicker of the eyelid, but it did not escape me.

“ He was a queer sort of chap when I first picked him up,” said the Captain, with an amused smile ; “ but I am gradually breaking him in.”

“ Breaking him in ? ” echoed Will.

“ Well, taking some of the nonsense out of him ; teaching the beggar to know his place ; ridding him of the preposterous ideas he entertained as to the dignity of his status. As though a fellow like that could have any status.”

“ Why not ? ” I asked, seeing that this was most probably the cause of Mr. Flas-kett’s dolefulness, and feeling a passing inclination to enter the lists in his favour. “ Australia is a free country. He has a

perfect right to be proud and independent."

"But pride in his station is absurd."

"I do not think that pride in any station is absurd."

"But, my dear Miss Hastings, when you are nobody and give yourself airs, you become a laughing-stock."

"Nobody," I echoed, with a look of surprise. "How can a man be a nobody?"

"I see what it is," he said with a laugh. "You are one of those dreadful socialistic—republican sort of people. Rights of man—not forgetting woman—equality, fraternity, and all that sort of thing. As though there ever were equality, or ever could be."

"Not equality as you understand it, certainly not."

"And pray how do I understand it?" he asked, with a quizzing smile.

"You'd better not press for an answer, old fellow," said Will, grinning furiously. "She's pretty hot on politics, I can tell

you, and rocks it in fairly warm when she's set going. You should hear her and Harold at it. They'll argue by the hour about the rights and wrongs of the world."

"Which they intend to set going on a new and improved plan, I suppose?" said the Captain, with a mischievous smile.

"Now you're laughing at me, Captain Langton," I replied; "and it's very unkind of you. Respect a wounded enemy."

"Ah, yes! I'm afraid I'm a very unworthy foeman. Please forgive me, and let me hope that it is not yet too late to inquire how the ankle is progressing?"

I was pleased to say the ankle was progressing favourably. It was not to be a very serious sprain, I thought; and though I expected it would prevent me getting about as usual for a little time, I nevertheless proposed remounting my horse again when the time came for our setting out. To this, however, the Captain would not listen.

“ You must go in the buggy,” said he.
“ Flaskett shall ride my horse back and lead yours.”

“ But what’s to become of you ? ”

“ I shall drive you back.”

“ But,” said I, tantalizingly, “ I cannot allow you to coop yourself up in a buggy, well knowing that you would be regretting the homeward gallop all the time.”

“ But if I prefer playing the martyr ? ”

“ Which I may be permitted to doubt. No, no, I assure you the servant will do most admirably.”

“ Would you rather I didn’t come ? ” he asked, in a low, reproachful voice. His eyes looking into mine, made my face burn.

“ How can you say such a thing, Captain Langton ? ”

“ Then I will come—if you have no objection ? ”

“ Objection ! I thought you would rather ride.”

“ Did you ? ”

To this direct appeal I could not

answer, for the earnest look in his face embarrassed me. The jest had grown serious all of a moment. He, however, considerably spared me a reply, for stepping over to where Will and Maud sat, he informed them of the arrangement he had just made, and then coo-ed loudly for the servant.

“Coo ee,” came back the answer from some bushes on our left, and a few minutes after Mr. Flaskett loomed in view. Then the three men bustled about the horses, while Maud put away the silver and folded the table-cloth, I looking lazily on, being forbidden to stir.

At length saddles and bridles were properly adjusted, the horse harnessed to the buggy, the remnants of the feast stored carefully away beneath the seat, and I lifted bodily into the trap. Then the Captain mounted to the seat beside me, and the next moment the little cavalcade clattered away.

I must confess to a keen enjoyment of that drive, in spite of the occasional sharp

twinges which shot through my foot. My companion was solicitude itself, and it is surprising how extremely tender a man can be when he lays himself out to it. I was very foolish, I suppose, but I felt a sweet gratification in my helplessness which whispered that the misfortune had not been too dearly bought. There was no pain, only a numbed remembrance of a pain, conducive, like the opiate, to lethargy. It was a pleasure to shut one's eyes, and listen to that soft voice of his whispering kind words, and feel the warm sun, tempered by the soft breeze, permeating one's body, as it were, and filling with a dreamy langour every chamber of the brain. I do not profess to recollect half of what he said. I have a confused remembrance of many tender phrases, and of looks which meant more than he dared utter; but it was all sensuous, all balmy and blissful, and full of delightful dreams.

At the junction of the Wallan Road, where we turned off to Langton, we pulled

up for a moment to say good-bye to Will, who was to leave us at this point and strike out for Granite Creek. He, dear old fellow, looked happier then than I had ever seen him look before, and as I glanced from Maud to him I thought an understanding seemed to exist between them. For his sake I hoped it might be so, for I knew that he had set his heart before her feet for her to cherish or spurn. It is a sad thing when a man or woman comes to this. When pride vanishes in the mist-rack of passion, the genius of destruction may besaid to smile. Out of the foolish day descends the desolate night, and though the bondage of love be sweet, sweeter than a Cæsar's might, more glorious than the triumphal march of an Alexander, may we not also liken it to the ignoble flight at Actium? Sweet is it to kiss the hem of her skirt, though the dust of the highways still clings to it ; sweet is it to know that he is ours, body and soul, bound with invisible fetters heated in the furnace of the soul and shaped on the anvil of the heart ;

yet sweeter than all is it to feel that we are *his*, and that from him, as from the sun, we catch the glow and glory of our being.

I invariably got into this train of thought whenever Maud and Will presented themselves before my mental vision. It seems to me now that I might have been better employed in looking after my own affairs, but it is singular how dull our vision is when we look back into ourselves, and how particularly bright and powerful it is when we look into other people. Not alone do we put the *right* construction on their actions, but we likewise analyze their motives and build up their thoughts ; in fact, I am not so sure we do not at times credit them with much of which they never dreamt. And how solicitous we are of our dear friend Ethel. We do hope she will not make a fool of herself over that conceited prig, Raffler, who only talks of the destructive fire of his eyes' artillery, and the number of silly female hearts he has broken in his day.

How Ethel, in turn, pities us with all her heart as she thinks of the occasional visits of dear Mr. Jones, sighs as she contemplates the excesses of our folly, and daily prays that the friend of her youth may never know the meaning of that sad word —Regret. But I suppose this careful consideration of our neighbour's welfare arises entirely from our humane wish of well-doing, and I have no doubt that the species, as a rule, thoroughly appreciate the delicate attention.

It was with rather a doleful cast of countenance that poor Will tore himself away from our little party, but he was to ride over on the following morning to ascertain how the sprain progressed, and that, I think, was the only bubble of consolation in his cup of bitterness.

“ You will take care of yourself, dear,” he said. “ No standing, you know.”

“ I will be as good as gold,” I answered merrily, for the foot seemed better already, and I was delighted at the thought of escaping a lengthened inconvenience.

"You will watch her, old fellow," said he, turning to Captain Langton. "Remember she's young and giddy, and—you understand?" he added with a smile.

"Perfectly. I'll set a guard over her, and if she attempts to move we'll tie her down."

Will nodded acquiescence to this arrangement; then after a few hurried words of parting turned his horse's head in the direction of Wallan, and trotted off.

Upon our arrival at the station, Captain Langton would insist upon having me carried into the house, though I assured him that I was perfectly able to walk. To this, however, he would not listen, but sending the groom Flaskett for a chair, he helped that worthy to carry me to my room, where they left me to the tender mercies of one of the maidservants, who duly applied another bandage to the swollen limb and treated me according to the rules of the "Family Physician," which rules I read aloud for her benefit as she worked.

And then I think I must have fallen asleep, for when I awoke the sun had already set, and through my window I could see the Southern Cross lying low down in the sky. Feeling rather hot, for the night was somewhat oppressive, I was about to spring from my bed to hurry out on the verandah when I recollect that I had sprained my foot but a few hours previously, and that to stand on it might, at the present moment, cause it considerable injury; yet when I did sit up and let it dangle on the floor, it felt so much better that I determined to risk the consequences. Therefore, after bathing my face in cold water, I hobbled quietly towards the verandah and slipped into the long cane chair, which, on account of my having shown such a decided partiality for it, was always called mine. I had not, however, been ensconced among the cushions many minutes before I heard a well-known step coming up the gravel path; the perfume of a cigar—and I knew the perfume of those cigars well by

this time—was next wafted in on the warm breeze through the trellis of roses, and then the dark outline of the wanderer appeared in view as he began to mount the steps of the verandah.

I lay watching him for several moments, my heart jumping as though it had serious designs of taking lodgment in my throat ; for it is a perverse creature, this heart of ours, and has a will of its own which will not be gainsaid. But at length, by persistent coaxing—for it is only by coaxing that you can get the creature to do anything—I prevailed upon it to comport itself with becoming dignity, nor bring its unhappy mistress into ridicule.

The Captain, in the meantime, stood staring stolidly out across the great dark plains, over which the moon's shadows cut fantastic capers, and I could tell by the way he pulled at his cigar—whose glow shone out through the darkness like a fierce *ignis fatuus*—that he was thinking of other things than the mystical stillness

which surrounded him. Presently he uttered an exclamation, half sigh and half of anger, and flung his cigar away down the gravelled path, where for a moment it spluttered like an exploding squib. Then he came towards me with hands outstretched, as though groping for the chair.

"If you wouldn't mind," said I, with a little laugh, as he stumbled against my frail couch, making it quiver ominously.

"You!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, I didn't know you were there. How long have you been here?" This was asked rather earnestly, I thought.

"Only a few minutes."

"I was under the impression you had gone to bed; and I should like to know how you dare come out without my permission?"

"Please, sir, the invalid is ever so much better, and she wanted a little fresh air."

"I am glad to hear that she is better,

but I must give her a good scolding for being so mutinous."

"Spare her this time."

"Well, well," he said, seizing a chair and seating himself beside me, "I suppose I must overlook this first act of insubordination, but if ever—oh, if ever—No," he added in a solemn voice, "the consequences will be too terrible even to mention."

"Then pray don't. You know you might terrify me and so throw me back a week or two. But where is Maud?"

"Writing letters, I think, or she was a while ago. Poor Maud, I'm afraid she finds the life here rather enervating. If it wasn't for this confounded funeral business, you know," he went on, "we might have a jolly time."

I did not say I thought they jogged along fairly well for a family in mourning, but such, nevertheless, was my impression. I merely replied that death was a solemn thing, and that out of respect for the departed the living

must at least don the semblance of woe.

"Oh, I was very fond of the old man," he said, "though he was a bit hard to get on with at times ; and I'm sure that Maud was fond of him too, but she, poor girl, has not been accustomed to this sort of life, and I know it chafes her."

"I daresay she does find it rather dull."

"Dull isn't the word."

"Ah," thought I, "if I only had the chance of always being dull in the same way." But I said aloud, "Of course I cannot understand it, never having been used to much ; but it seems incredible that anyone should tire of this place in a few weeks."

"Wouldn't you ?" he said.

I thought his voice sounded full of suppressed impatience, but I answered with a laugh, "I do not think so."

He was silent for several moments, during which I could see him tugging

fiercely at his moustache ; then he said, reverting to the old question, which he never seemed to get beyond, “ And do you mean to say you never wish to go out into the world, to see the great things of the world ? Surely, surely you could not be content to pass your life in this wretched, out-of-the-way hole ? ”

“ I have tried to school myself to such a life,” I replied.

“ But it is not possible that you should ever live it ? ”

“ Who knows ? ”

“ But you cannot seriously entertain the thought of such an existence ? ”

“ I am afraid it is too serious a thought to be entertained lightly.”

“ But you would like to go—you would like to see the world ? ”

His words came quickly, hotly from his lips, and I knew by the way he breathed, by the way his hand trembled as he rested it on the back of my chair, that he was thrilling with excitement.

“ What a perfectly superfluous ques-

tion," I replied with a little excited laugh.

"Florence," he said, slipping suddenly on his knees beside me and pressing my hand between his burning palms, "I want you to come away with me, dear, to leave this dreadful old life behind."

"With you, you?" I gasped, his passionate voice thrilling me to the quick.

"Yes, dearest, with me, because—because I love you better than the whole world."

.
But why should I go on? All I remember of those mad moments was his kneeling beside me, pouring a flood of passionate words into my ears, and kissing me like one half mad.

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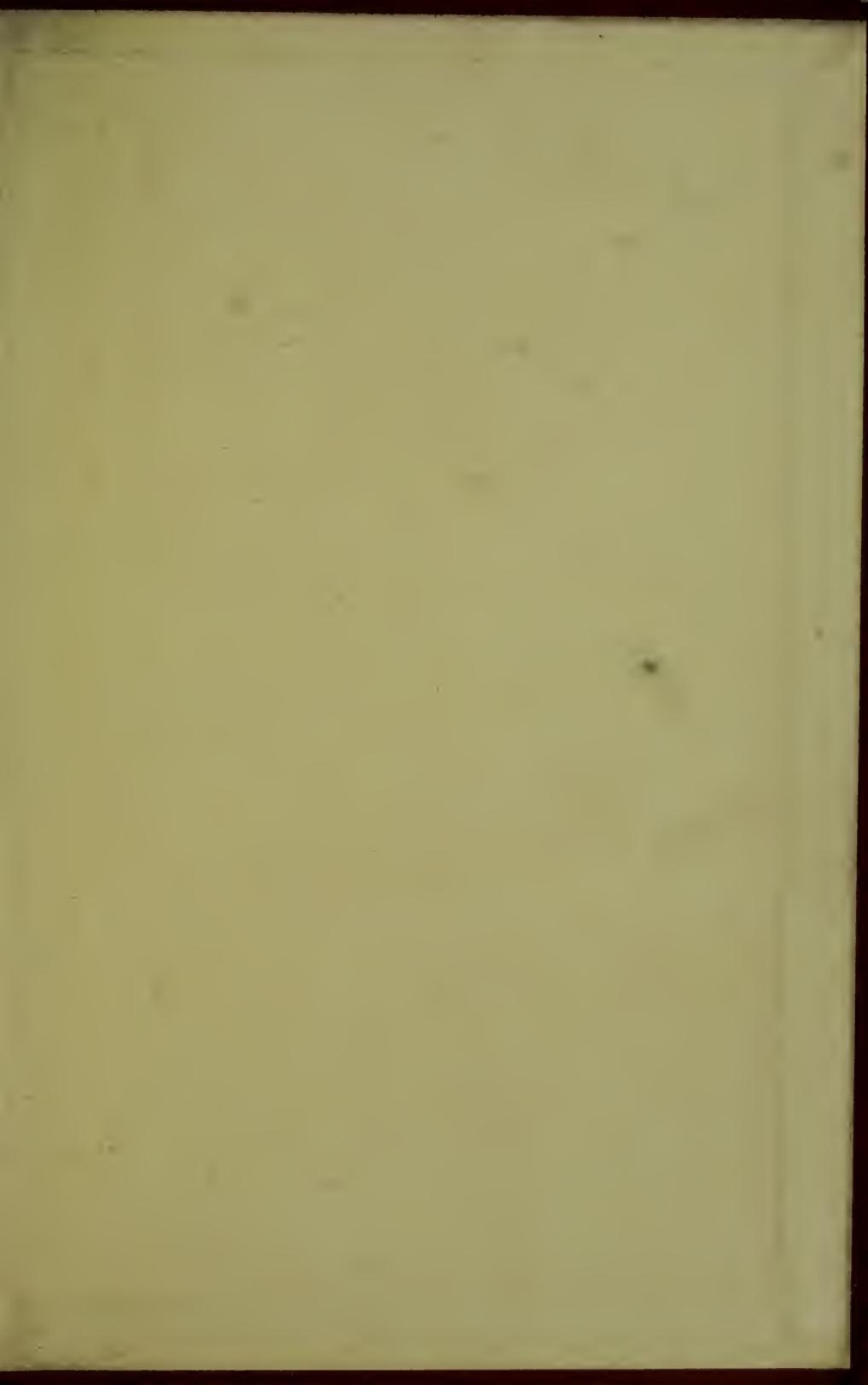
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